THE LAST TRY

JOHN REED SCOTT

SHE FLUNG HIM A TAUNTING SMILE AND RACED AWAY

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The Last Try

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"In Her Own Right," "The Woman In Question,"
"The Princess Dehra," Etc.

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To

F. W. S.

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THE LAST TRY

I

FIVE YEARS AFTER

It is a mistake to be merciful—that is, it is a mistake ever to show leniency to a rogue when one has the upper hand and there can be no doubt of his villainy. At such times it is much the wiser and much the better part to put an end to him—it will profit nothing to let him live, and it may result later in days of vexation and danger and dire misfortune, all of which would have been avoided by a moment of stern purpose when the rogue was helpless.

I have seen something of life in my fifty years. I have looked upon scenes such as are not given to the average man to behold—I have been an actor in some of them—but I have yet to see an instance when the soft heart has not been rewarded later by ingratitude, and treachery, and even death. As a governing proposition, the only safe rogue is a dead rogue, and the only safe way to act is to kill him without hesitation when the opportunity offers. What profits it to let him live, I say, what profits it?

If, instead of simply disarming him, Armand Dalberg had killed the Duke of Lotzen, when the latter set upon him in the garden the night of the Vierle

Masque, the Duke would not have lived to foment discord and turmoil when King Frederick died. And if Armand had driven his sword through Lotzen's false throat, as he held him at his mercy that day in the King's library when the lost Book of Laws was recovered—as he was amply justified in doing —the Princess and he would have been spared a deal of suffering and distress, and Valeria much——

But I anticipate. The buoyancy of youth is mine no longer; I grow reminiscent and reflective with age, and sometimes I am apt to narrate the end before the beginning—which is a bit awkward and confusing. But if the tale is to be told, it is for me to tell it, though I shall do it but poorly, I know.

It has been already written by Dalberg himself how he, a plain Major in the American Army, became by right of descent an Archduke of Valeria, and, to the Duke of Lotzen's chagrin, the accepted suitor of the Princess Dehra. And there have been recorded, by another, the events incident to the death of Frederick the King, the disappearance of the ancient book containing the House-laws of the Dalbergs, the complications that ensued, the struggle between Armand and Lotzen for the Crown during the interregnum, ending with the triumph of Armand and the Princess Royal, and the defeat and voluntary exile of the Duke.

My tale has to do with the return of Lotzen, five years later, and the events that followed—and

which prove the truth of my principle that it is a mistake to be merciful.

It will be remembered that under the late Frederick's decree Dehra became Queen, in her own right, and that Armand, displacing the Duke of Lotzen as Heir Presumptive, was restored to his proper place in the Line of Succession. The interregnum ended, Dehra and he had been promptly married; and the same day, despite his objections, he was formally proclaimed King, with equal power and dignity, and the right of survivorship to the Crown—much the same as William and Mary, in the English Line. Thereafter the Queen took little part in the actual government. At her express instance it was Armand who presided at the Council, and who exercised all the open functions of royalty —indeed she would have yielded him the precedence also, if he had permitted. But as to this he was firm. He might spare her the actual cares of ruling, yet he would not assume her place in the ceremonies—there he would be second, never first. He was co-ruler with her, but he never forgot, nor permitted the nation nor her to forget, that it was *her* act which made him so.

Then the little Henry came, and great was the rejoicing throughout Valeria—though in the Palace the joy was shadowed by the knowledge that there would never be another—their first-born would also be their only born.

It may not be amiss also to say that my bachelor

days had ended, and that the little woman who ruled my heart—and still rules it—is she who was Lady Helen Radnor. We had been married four years—four very satisfactory years for me, and I trust for her also. The mating of one in the calm of middle life with one in the bloom of youth and beauty is much of a problem, I know, and some there are who solve it unhappily and with tarnished lives. We have solved it otherwise, thank God! at least, we have solved four years of it, and, on the basis of the past, I am content to trust the future.

At present, Helen was in England on a visit to her parents, Lord and Lady Radnor. I was in Washington, killing time at the club, and reminiscing with the old fellows who live in the past and dream it into the present. I am not exactly given to the habit, but I find it is interesting to observe, while it serves at the same time as a warning of what I must avoid. I had retired as Ambassador to the Court of Valeria some three years before, and Helen and I had wandered leisurely over the world, until about two months ago when I was called home on business and she went to the Radnors. This business was nearing completion, and I had taken my passage for the twenty-seventh, more glad to get back to her than is quite befitting in a man of my years.

Only that day the Secretary of State had sent for me and had offered me a secret commission, such

as I once had liked, but I was not to be tempted. I had something else in life—something more worth while to me. I turned a deaf ear to all his persuasions. There were others, now in the service, who could execute the mission quite as well as I, so there was no actual need for me—when there should be need I would respond. And with that he had to be content.

I had met Marmont on the Avenue that afternoon, and had invited him to dine with me. About half-after six, as I was leisurely getting into a dinner coat, the telephone rang. Hobbs went into the outer room to answer. There was a queer look on his face when he returned.

"Who was it?" said I.

"I don't know, sir," said he, "but he'll be around at once."

"What do you mean?" I inquired.

"He didn't give his name, sir—just asked if you were here, and said he would be around at once."

"Why didn't you inquire his name?"

"I did, sir, but he said good-bye and rang off."

"Didn't he even inform you where he was telephoning from?"

"No, sir."

"I reckon it was Marmont," I thought, as I went into the next room and took up an evening paper.

Presently there was another ring on the telephone. I got up and answered it.

"Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones are calling," said the clerk.

"Who are calling?" I asked.

"Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones."

"What Smith and what Jones?"

"Mr. John Smith and Mr. John Jones," he returned. "They say you're expecting them."

"Send them up," said I.

Evidently it was their call that my man had answered, but who they were I had not the least idea, and their names were not especially informing.

In a moment there was a knock on the door. I heard Hobbs open it and usher them in. I put aside my paper and arose as they entered the room —then stood staring at the foremost, in speechless amazement.

"Hello! Courtney, old man!" said he. "Surprised to see us, are you?"

"Dalberg!" I gasped, "Major—I mean, your Majesty!"

He came forward and took my hand.

"Just plain Mr. Smith, please, Dick," he said, "and don't you know Mr. Jones?" he added, motioning to his companion.

"Moore!" I said, faintly. "Moore, by all that's good! Are there any others?"

"No others."

"It is well!—I may survive. But if the Princess should be at the Embassy, I would——"

"She isn't, Dick—more's the pity!" the King laughed.

"Then may I ask——"

"You may, indeed," said he, taking a chair. "Sit down, Moore; we haven't been invited, but Courtney's forgot, I know. He is just a bit surprised to see us—hey, Dick?"

"Surprised is putting it mildly," I replied. "Who wouldn't be surprised to see his Majesty, the King of Valeria, accompanied by General Moore, his personal aide-de-camp, walk into his apartment in the City of Washington?"

"When you put it that way, I suppose you're right, but if you say Armand Dalberg and a friend dropped in unexpectedly, you will be nearer the truth."

"You're here incog?"

"I am. No one on the steamer knew us—the customs officials treated us as though we were smugglers—we spent two days gloriously in New York —came across, this afternoon, and straight here to you."

"And the Embassy?"

"Bless your heart! the Embassy doesn't know I'm outside Dornlitz—no one knows it except Dehra, and she is so much taken up with the boy, and affairs of State, she'll not miss me."

"I am not so sure," I remarked.

"Nor I, either!" he laughed. "Courtney, she is just as beautiful, and as brave, and as loving, and as queenly as the day we were wed."

"I know it," said I. "She couldn't be otherwise."

"She sent something to you," he went on.

"Yes?" said I.

"She said, 'kiss dear Mr. Courtney for me.'"

"With your permission, I prefer to let her deliver that message in person," said I.

He laughed. "You're coming back to us?"

"Possibly—some time next month."

"Good! good! We'll do our best to entertain you. You've always had a reasonably good time in Valeria, haven't you?"

"It depends on what you consider a good time."

"Well, at least it was entertaining?" he chuckled.

"Exciting and nerve-racking, I should call it."

"But it came out right in the end."

"Have you reached the end?" I asked.

"We've got five years nearer it, at all events."

"Is Lotzen dead—I hadn't heard of it?" said I.

"No—Lotzen isn't dead," he answered slowly.

"And while he is alive there is always the possibility of trouble."

"It is his power, not his disposition that I doubt."

"You keep him under surveillance?"

"I believe such are Dehra's orders. For myself, I ignore him."

"To ignore him was always your way—and led to dire results. But for the Princess' precautions, you would be long since dead."

"I know it," he said. "There's something very satisfying to owe your life to the woman you love."

"And who loves you," I appended.

He smiled.

"Are you not incurring foolish danger by coming to America incog—and with only Moore for companion?" I asked. "It requires a week to come; another to return—and much may happen in two weeks."

"You forget the time I'm here," he said good naturedly.

"Which makes it only the more inexcusable," I retorted.

"You are as bad as Bernheim. He is forever preaching caution. He would have me live in a bomb-proof house and go around in chain armor."

"The chain armor was useful once, I remember."

"And hence he would have me clad in it forever. If you will permit the unkingly expression, 'you fellows make me tired.'"

But the way he said it belied his words. He was glad we did it—for Dehra did it, too. And what she did was always right with Armand.

"Where is Lotzen now?" I asked.

"In Paris, I believe. He applied recently for leave to return to his command, but Dehra promptly denied it. She has a way about her sometimes, Dick, that is very final."

"I have seen it," I smiled. "It is the Dalberg

way. I've often wondered what would happen if ever you and she were really to disagree."

"We never shall," said he. "There is enough give-and-take in our natures to get us over that danger. Moreover, I shall always remember that she was the Queen before I was King."

"What does she think of the present expedition?" I asked.

"She understands a man's desire to get back to the old scenes for a few weeks. I'm supposed to be on the royal yacht, somewhere in the Mediterranean. The yacht is there right enough, but it dropped Moore and me very quietly at Nice. We hastened to Cherbourg and caught the next ship. We shall spend ten days in looking up old friends and in taking a final adieu of America. Then it is back to Valeria, and no more across the seas. This is my farewell visit, Courtney—make me welcome, you old cynic, make me welcome, won't you?"

"Your Majesty——" I began.

"Cut that out," said he sharply. "Armand, in private—Mr. Smith, in public."

"But you can't maintain your incog," I objected.

"Of course I can, except to a very few—and I'll trust them not to disclose it. My intimates will recognize me, no one else will. It is five years since I left, and most persons have long forgot that I ever was. Those who haven't may note a resemblance, but they'll never imagine it is really

I. By the way, Dick, I didn't hear you tell us that you're glad to see us."

"Quite superfluous," I said. "And much understating the facts."

"One wouldn't infer so from the manner of our reception. You had more the air of asking 'what the devil brings you here—why aren't you over in Valeria holding down your job?'"

"Well, you see," said I with an apologetic smile, "I found you the job and insisted on your taking it, and now to have you commit this foolishness, as soon as my back is turned, is disappointing."

"We will say no more about it," said he, laughing. "Forgive me this time and I won't offend again."

"I shall forgive you when you are back in Dornlitz safe and sound," I remarked, joining in the laugh.

"You like shivers, don't you old man?" he asked. "I thought America was the land of the free and the home of the brave."

"It is," said I—"it's so free and so brave that we let everyone do as he likes until *after* he has committed some crime, then we start in to prevent it. Oh! you may laugh, but I don't fancy you running around here without any protection, when Lotzen is at large."

"You forget Moore," he observed.

"That is the only saving grace about you—that you brought Moore along. But he is not enough.

If you wanted to come, why, in the name of common-sense, didn't you come as King, or else advise the American government of your presence. Then it would have been responsible for your safety, and proper precautions would have been observed. As it is——"

"As it is, I'm no trouble to anyone—just plain Mr. Smith."

"At least you will notify your Embassy, and let it provide a suitable guard of detectives."

"Guards!" he exclaimed. "I don't want any guards near me. I've enough of them at home, Heaven knows! There they may be proper, but here I'm a free man, and I'm going to enjoy it the short time I stay. If it were not for Dehra and the boy, I think, sometimes, I should cut the whole thing, come back to America, and let Lotzen have the Crown for which he yearns."

"Possibly," said I. "Possibly, but not probably. You despise Lotzen so much you wouldn't think of renouncing in his favor."

"You have touched the point, I reckon!" he laughed. "Between the Duke of Lotzen and me there can never be aught but an armed neutrality."

"And an armed neutrality implies arms and danger," said I.

"Not in America," Armand interjected.

"That remains to be seen. Meanwhile——"

"We will proceed to enjoy ourselves as plain Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones, the cares of royalty

having fallen from us when we went over the side of the royal yacht."

"Where are you stopping?" I asked.

"Here—is it as good as it used to be?"

"Better—they have a negro who cooks terrapin as it should be cooked."

"I'm glad to hear it. I've not tasted terrapin since I left this country five years ago."

"Good!" I said. "Go and dress and we will dine at eight."

"Just ourselves?" he asked.

"No—Marmont is to be there. I met him on the Avenue this afternoon."

"Marmont from Pittsburgh, you mean?"

I nodded. "Any objections?"

"None whatever—in fact, I'm rather pleased, for I'm going to pay the dinner bet I made with you, in Pittsburgh, just before we went to Valeria."

"A dinner bet?" said I.

"Yes—you bet me a dinner of twenty that I would dine with the King and dance with the Princess within thirty days."

"And you lost. I had forgot." Then I looked at him, perplexed. "You can't give such a dinner and maintain your incognito."

"Of course not—but you can ask only those you trust, and pledge them to secrecy."

"I see you're a king," I remarked—"arbitrary, self-willed, and brooking no contradiction."

"They are some of the compensations for being

a king," he responded. "Come along, Moore; we haven't much time to change our togs—meet you at eight o'clock down stairs, Dick."

When they had gone, I sat down and went over the situation. To one who had been through the events of five years ago it was startling, to say the least, to have the King of Valeria suddenly walk into his apartments, attended only by Moore, and announce with calm indifference that no one but the Queen knew of his absence—and that he was back in America to view the old scenes and have a good time. Accustomed as I was to his ways, I never in the wildest moments had considered the possibility that he would leave the Kingdom surreptitiously and come to America incognito. It was courting disaster.

If Ferdinand of Lotzen became aware of it, what results might not follow! A king surrounded by his attendants, or in the retirement of his private life, is quite a different personage from the ordinary man who goes about alone, unprotected by aught but his own arm and the law. And Lotzen hated him with an implacable hate—though not without cause, I must admit, since Armand had bested him in the struggle for a kingdom and a bride. Let him but know that Armand was in America and there was no guessing what devilish schemes would emanate from that fertile and calculating brain. Because he had remained quiet for five years was no assurance for the future. Rather was it a

warning and a menace—a threat louder than words that the score between them was not yet come to a final settlement. Here was the opportunity for which the Duke was waiting—patiently as the tiger waits its prey—or else I did not know his Highness and his ways. And he knew—of that I was sure. He knew, and was preparing to spring—maybe had already sprung.

For Lotzen had his sympathizers and his followers, who thought he had been ill used and improperly deprived of his own. There were others, too, who were influenced by the money he paid—and these were the more to be feared. One cannot govern a nation, even for five years, however just he may be, without making enemies and provoking antagonisms which, later, may produce results that are most astonishing and totally without apparent reason. And the worst of it is, that the ones who are smiling on the surface, while really nursing their grievances in private, are apt to be the bitterest in their enmity. It was so, indeed, in this case. The Baron—but again I grow garrulous and anticipate.

At five minutes of eight, I went down stairs and found Marmont awaiting me.

"I've asked two more friends to dine with us," I remarked. "Ah! here they are now. Mr. Marmont—Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones."

The King and Moore bowed formally; Marmont, in a puzzled sort of way.

"I am glad to meet you, sir," said the King.

"I'm glad to meet you, sir," Moore added, just a trifle behind his chief.

Then we went in to dinner.

"Who is he?" Marmont whispered.

"Who is who?" said I.

"Smith—he looks enough like the King of Valeria to be his twin brother."

"You're right!" said I. "Now that you draw my attention to it, I can detect the resemblance."

"You can detect the resemblance!" he scoffed. "Lord! man, you must be blind."

"Not at all," as we reached our table. "I've particularly good vision for one of my age. Mr. Smith," said I, as we sat down, "Mr. Marmont has noted something which may interest you—your resemblance to a friend who, five years ago, was a Major in the American Army and is to-day the King of Valeria."

"I have heard of the resemblance," the King answered. "It must be rather striking."

"It's more than striking," Marmont replied. "It is positively marvellous; even your voice is similar."

I glanced at the King, and caught permission in his eye.

"Not similar," said I. "It is the same."

"What?" exclaimed Marmont sharply.

"It is the same," I repeated.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Can't you understand plain English?" I responded, smiling.

"You don't mean!" he gasped, and stopped, unable to say more.

"That is just what he does mean," said the King, laying his hand restrainingly on Marmont's arm. "I am Armand Dalberg."

"The King of Valeria!"

"No—the King of Valeria is in Dornlitz. I'm plain Dalberg, alias John Smith for the few days I am on this side the world. You understand?"

"I do, sir," said Marmont. "I appreciate the compliment of knowing, more than it might seem."

There was just a touch of awe in Marmont's words and manner. He had known Dalberg intimately for two years (when the latter was stationed at Pittsburgh, as Engineer officer in charge of the District), but now he was speaking to a king, and he was not able to forget it. Even I, try as I might, could not, at times, forget it—and Dalberg had been, and is still, the best friend I have in the world.

It must be said for Armand that he had banished his rank entirely, even toward Moore, and was again the frank, unaffected American gentleman—in his conversation, his manner, his demeanor, just one of us. By tacit consent, Valeria and all things concerning it were tabooed, and we talked of other things—but more especially of the things of five years ago, when he was simply an officer in the American Army.

We were finishing the terrapin when I observed, casually as one does in such places, a couple who had just been shown, with liberal-feed deference, to a table in the opposite corner of the room. The woman was partially hidden by a palm, and her back was toward me, but I noticed she was slender, her gown daringly low-cut, and her splendid shoulders of a wondrous whiteness. The man with her had turned to speak to the head waiter, who was standing with becoming respect behind him, and I could not see his face. There was something familiar in his figure, however, and my glance was still upon him when he swung about.

I dropped my fork with a clatter! At the same instant, his eyes rested on me, lingered a moment in languid interest, fluttered indifferently over Marmont and Moore, grew wide with surprise as they beheld the King, and then went back to his companion.

It was his Highness the Duke of Lotzen! His Highness the Duke of Lotzen!—and Madeline Spencer! I knew now those dead white shoulders and that slender, girlish form.

II

THE DUKE OF LOTZEN

I GLANCED at the King. He and Marmont were engaged in a discussion; they had not noticed. Moore's back was to the room and he was devoting his attention to the terrapin.

I hesitated. Should I tell the King at once, wait for him to see them, or, in the event of his not noticing them, tell him after the dinner?

I remembered a certain excellent supper that Armand gave one night five years before in the Hanging Garden at Dornlitz, which was irretrievably spoiled by Madeline Spencer when she intruded and proclaimed herself his wife. And I did not want to spoil this one, though the circumstances and the situation now were vastly different from what they were then.

I was still debating the question and watching those at the other table out of the side of my eye, while Dalberg and Marmont talked and Moore forked up the last trace of the diamond-back—when the matter was taken out of my hands by Lotzen himself.

He said a word to Spencer. She flashed an amazed look our way—thereby showing me her full face, and that I had surmised correctly—and said something in return. Lotzen shrugged his

shoulders, leaned over toward her and made reply, then arose and came toward us. At the same moment, the King glanced up and saw him. The look of surprise, which came for an instant to his face, was quickly replaced by a smile, and his eyes sought mine.

"I don't seem to be able to get away from him," he remarked.

I arose and stepped forward.

"Let him come," the King continued. "This promises to be interesting."

Moore caught the words and glanced over his shoulder.

"My God!" he exclaimed.

I thought it my privilege to disregard the King's request. I paused where the others could hear, but far enough away to relieve them of the necessity of arising.

"I was wondering whether I should not see you here," was Lotzen's greeting, as he held out his hand.

It was as if we were old acquaintances reunited after a long separation.

"I cannot say the same for myself," I replied. "This is the last place I should expect to meet you."

"You are surprised, yes?" he asked.

"I am indeed."

"But not so surprised, I venture to say, as you were to see his Majesty."

"His Majesty?" I interrogated.

"Your pardon, monsieur,—I forgot, doubtless his Majesty has left his titles on the other side of the Atlantic, and is a simple American once more."

The word simple was drawled with unmistakable meaning. That, according to my observation, was Lotzen's one serious mistake—underestimating Armand's ability. He never gave "The American," as he contemptuously called him, credit for any of the moves which defeated him, except one—he, perforce, had to admit Armand's pre-eminent superiority with the sword. The duel in the Vierle garden, and the subsequent one in the King's library had demonstrated it beyond dispute.

"I have to confess to not understanding your Highness," said I.

"Of course! I hardly thought you would understand me," he answered. Then he smiled blandly. "Are you not going to present your companions, Mr. Courtney?"

He quite took me by surprise and my face showed it, I suppose, for he laughed a little laugh and stood waiting.

"You flatter me," said I, "but the three gentlemen who are my guests have an aversion to meeting strangers—which you can well appreciate. Under the circumstances, I am obliged to decline the honor."

"I appreciate your reasons very well—they are

exceedingly to the point," he said, with a slight bow—then stepped by me, with a quick look into Moore's face, and to the table. "Yes, I thought so!" he reflected. "You and Moore. The two black twins, as usual. You masquerade together since the Vierle Ball, it seems." He faced the King abruptly. "Cousin, be advised; the masquerade may be done once too often."

The King raised his eye-brows, in polite surprise.

"I take it, sir, since you look at me, that your remarks are addressed to me also," he remarked.

"You take it exactly right," replied Lotzen. "I compliment you on your powers of discernment, cousin."

"Mr. Courtney," the King went on, looking at me, "is this man a friend of yours?"

"He is not," I hastened to assure him. "He is only an acquaintance."

"I thought as much. He has the most amazing effrontery," and, giving him his shoulder, he resumed the talk with Marmont, who, though at a loss to understand the interruption, immediately was all attention to the King.

The Duke smiled suavely

"You're not looking well, cousin—be careful lest it run into a decline;" and, with a careless nod to me, he left us.

The King watched him go back to his table and his fair companion.

"Threatened men live long, thank Heaven!"

said he. "It is not the first nor, I reckon, will it be the last that you have flung at me." He paused and frowned a trifle. "I wonder which of us will die first?"

He said it reflectively, but I thought the opportunity too good to miss.

"At least, it's not difficult to know which one stands the better chance of dying," said I; "nor which one will turn Heaven and earth to accomplish it."

"As I have heard before!" he smiled.

"And as you are likely to hear again, many times—and not heed. Why the devil didn't you make an end of him when you had your opportunity—at the Vierle Masque, and again in the King's library?"

"Those opportunities are passed," he replied.

"They are," said I; "but there will be another opportunity soon—why not take it? why always be merciful?"

"Merciful? Am I, I wonder," he replied. "To eat his heart out in exile for what I have! Is that mercy, think you?"

"The question isn't how it affects him," said I. "It isn't merciful to yourself to let him live."

"Perhaps you're right, Courtney, perhaps you're right. Leastwise, it is open to debate, with much that can be said in favor of your proposition."

"That is as far as you ever go," I retorted. "When the pinch comes you grow lenient."

"Leniency is peculiar to the brave man!" he laughed.

"Or the foolhardy," I added.

He clapped me on the arm.

"Dear old Dick!" he said. "It was worth the trip over just to see you at your old occupation of lecturing me."

"And much good it has done," I replied. "Much good it has done."

"I'm still alive—and Lotzen is in voluntary exile and I am King. It has done no harm."

"No apparent harm, so far as ultimate results are concerned; but it has done much harm in the interim. If you had killed Lotzen in the Vierle garden, you would not have had the subsequent struggle with him when King Frederick died—and if you had killed him in the King's library, you would not be menaced with trouble now."

"You scent trouble, old hound?" he asked.

"I do—and soon. I always scent trouble when Lotzen is near."

"Even here, in free America?" he bantered.

"It's the opportunity, not the locality, that is material. Lotzen would kill you in Heaven, if he but got the chance."

"What is your opinion, Marmont?" the King asked.

"Who is Lotzen?" said Marmont—"I must have known five years ago, but I confess to have forgot."

"The man who would be King of Valeria if our

friend here had not displaced him," said I—" after duels, murder, violence, and so forth, ending in Lotzen's discomfiture."

" Is he chastened by defeat? " Marmont asked.

At that even the King laughed.

" I think you can assume that he is not chastened by defeat," he replied. " The point that Courtney makes, and which I question, is that he will continue the fight here in America, if opportunity offer or can be made."

" I reckon I shall have to vote with Courtney," said Marmont. " One's disposition doesn't change with a change of skies."

" Very true! " the King answered. " But with Lotzen it is not so much a question of disposition as of means and method. My presence in America was as much a surprise to him as to Courtney. I was the last person he thought to see. He has none of the machinery at hand for plots and violence. They are on the other side. This country is not educated up to his methods, and, by the time he has a scheme perfected and ready to execute, I'll be gone."

" You are sure he didn't know you were here? " I asked.

" Absolutely—no one knows it in Valeria save Dehra."

" One of his spies may have seen you disembark from the yacht," said I, " or when you were crossing the continent to catch the boat for New York."

" I would have had to be traced to the ship

and seen aboard it, before they would know whither I was bound—and then Lotzen would have had to follow instantly in order to overtake me in Washington, two days after I landed. No, it's not even in the range of the probable."

"It is in the range of the possible," I amended.

"Barely, my friend, barely!"

"I've observed that, with Lotzen, the possible is always probable."

The King laughed. "Which is very good as an epigram, but like most epigrams not strictly true. Moreover, you and I don't entirely agree as to Lotzen. You ascribe to him certain qualities which I am unable to see in him. To you and Bernheim, he is a devil endowed with all the pre-eminent attributes of evil. To me, he is simply a dangerous schemer—whose schemes, thus far, have come to naught."

"Thus far!" I quoted sententiously. "Exactly, thus far! If they had been successful you would not be called upon to consider the future: there would not be any future——"

"For me," he finished. "I grant it; I should be dead. It is not his ultimate object but his ultimate success which I doubt."

"And the less opportunity the less the chance for success," I added.

"You would have me build a wall around myself, Courtney, and let no one through until he has been inspected and passed as harmless."

"I would have you take proper precaution under existing circumstances."

"Which means you would have me return to Valeria at once."

"That would be the wisest course; but, if you won't, then let me either advise the State Department of your presence, or myself provide detectives to guard you. If Dehra were here!"

He laughed in reminiscence. "You are thinking of Lotzen Castle, and how she braved the Duke to save me."

"I was thinking of that—and much more," I said.

He looked thoughtfully across toward Lotzen. I knew something of what was in his mind:—the days when they two struggled for the Crown, and Dehra stood by the side of one of them, cheering him on to success. I waited. In the past, her influence had tempered his rashness, and I thought that it would now—at least, if it failed it were useless for me to protest further. Moore, too, realized the situation and was silent. Marmont, with an instinctive sense of the moment, was preoccupied with nothing.

Presently, the King's glance came back to me with a smile.

"It is another situation, this presence of Lotzen," he said—"and provokingly complicating. You may employ the detectives, Dick—but tell them not to obtrude themselves unnecessarily. I have

enough of guards, and guards, and guards at home. I did think I should be free in America, but—— Oh, damn Lotzen!"

"Amen!" said I. "See that you condemn him when your chance comes."

"Am I to have another chance?" he asked.

"You are," I answered. "Something tells me that you two are to stand once more, as man to man, with only the swords between you."

"Does your vision tell you, also, which of us survives?" he laughed.

"It is not necessary," said I. "You have won twice."

"And the third time, he may win," the King observed.

"The better swordsman will win," said I.

"The better swordsman *should* win, I grant you —but there is many a slip twixt the point and the *cœur*, Dick, there is many a slip!"

"For Lotzen as well as for you," I replied. "Come, come, Armand, you know that you can kill him—so, why imply that you may lose?"

"Because I may—though I shall strive to win," he said seriously. Then he turned to Marmont, who was gazing toward Lotzen's table. "She is a very pretty woman, isn't she?" he queried.

"Pretty!" exclaimed Marmont. "She's a dream!—a perfect dream! Such a face, such a figure, such a complexion, such hair, such——"

"She's got him," the King laughed. "If he

could see her foot and ankle, she would have him on his knees."

"And your dream is likely to change quickly into a nightmare," said I.

He stared at me.

"He doesn't understand," said the King. "Tell him who and what his dream-woman is, Courtney."

Marmont turned to me inquiringly.

"She is the widow of Colonel Spencer of our Army," I said, and told him how, at Lotzen's procurement, she had come to Dornlitz and had publicly claimed to be Armand Dalberg's wife, supporting the truth of her assertion with a marriage certificate, regular on its face—how, eventually, after many plots and schemes the claim was shown to be false, she was sent out the country, and Lotzen banished to his titular estates in Lotzenia. How, in the travesty of fate, Lotzen himself fell a victim to her beauty—took her with him to his Castle, and, Frederick the King dying, brought her again to Dornlitz, established her in the Ferida Palace, where she aided him in his attempts to procure the lost Book of Laws and on Armand's life, ending in his discomfiture and defeat, and their mutual retirement from Valeria.

The narrative took time, however, with the occasional side-tracks and the interruptions by Marmont. Just as it was finished, the Duke and Mrs. Spencer arose and came slowly down the room, the latter in the lead. She was still as young as

on the night I saw her first in the Hanging Garden, five years ago. To a casual observer she had scarcely turned twenty, whereas in point of fact I knew her to be nearly thirty. Her form was slender and lithe as a girl's, her face calm and peaceful as a saint's. Instead of the black she had always affected hitherto, she was gowned this evening in pale blue silk, with touches of green, that fitted every curve in her sinuous figure like a glove. The men stared after her, and even the women stared, too. But she never seemed to know it—passing down the line, apparently all unconscious of the admiring glances that followed her. Certainly she was good to look at—with all the highbred beauty one attributes to a princess of the olden time.

Armand, who knew her best, had once described her as "Diana perverted." And so she was—favor free to-day, favor cold to-morrow; elusive as a moonbeam, fickle as the wind, tempting and alluring as a vestal, false and faithless as a Daughter of the Foam. To me she was the very incarnation of calculating voluptuousness in the frame of a goddess. How lovely she was, the present occasion demonstrated: she still maintained her sway over Lotzen, and this though he had married her morganatically. Plainly, she understood how to play him against himself to keep him always eager.

As they drew near, I glanced at Armand.

"I don't intend to notice them," he answered, and began to talk with Moore.

"She may address you," said I.

"I don't know—it depends on the woman and what she says," he replied. "I won't reply, if I can avoid it."

Mrs. Spencer was conversing with Lotzen, but, as she neared our table, she looked casually at us—stopped, hesitated, and, with the frankest possible smile, held out her hand to me.

"Mr. Courtney!" she said. "I haven't seen you for years."

I arose—and the others at the table, perforce, did likewise. What was the meaning of this play? —for play it was.

"I think it is just five years since we met in Dornlitz," I replied, with a stiff bow and just a touch to her fingers.

"Is it really five years?—I had no idea it was so long," she answered. "You, sir, do not look it."

"And madame grows younger as time passes," said I, stepping back to my place to intimate that she should pass on.

She shot me a fascinating smile of comprehension, and turned to the King.

"Has not your Majesty one little word of greeting for me?" she inquired.

"If you are addressing me, madame, I shall have to plead forgetfulness of a previous meeting," the King replied, with a bow that was very gallant, and yet very distant.

She gave him a look of amused indifference, and turned away.

"There's not a doubt of it," she said to Lotzen; "it is he," and she turned around and smiled meaningly at Armand.

"I was sure of it," we heard him say, as he passed out of ear-shot. "He and his Jackal."

And, turning also, he laughed a little mocking laugh, which, though it could not carry to us, yet was as evident as though it had.

"I wonder what brought them to America," said the King.

"To see the country—if it was not in pursuit of you," said I.

He shook his head.

"It wasn't to see the country, nor was it in pursuit of me," he answered.

"Maybe they are going around the world by the western route," I suggested.

"Then I wish them a happy journey and a long time on the way."

"Amen!" said I.

"At least, I can get back to Valeria before they return!" he laughed—"so there will be no need for your guard, if your theory is correct."

"We're not going to test my theory at your expense. We'll have the guard," said I. "He may change his mind, since he has seen you, my lord."

"Well! have your way," he said resignedly; "only, see that they keep out of my sight—let me

fancy that I'm an American again, for a little while."

I was watching the Duke and Mrs. Spencer. Just at the dining-room door, they were joined by a man whom I did not recognize—my eyesight is *not* of the best, despite my boast to Moore.

"Some one is speaking with the Duke?" I interrogated.

The King and Moore faced around quickly.

"Bigler!" said they simultaneously.

At the same moment, Bigler turned and looked our way. He started incredulously, said a word to Lotzen, looked again steadily at the King a moment, and, with a laugh, followed the other two down the corridor.

"How many more, besides Count Bigler, has he with him, I wonder?" said I.

"At least one of your hypotheses, that the Duke pursued me to America, is refuted!" Armand chuckled. "Spencer's and Bigler's surprise was too genuine to be assumed—they could not have been aware of my presence here."

"Which is no evidence that Lotzen didn't know," said I.

"No absolute evidence, but fairly conclusive, don't you think?"

"Nothing is conclusive where Lotzen is involved—save death," I replied.

III

THE AUTOMOBILE

The next few days passed peacefully enough. At my instance, two plain-clothes men guarded the King constantly but not obtrusively, and such additional provisions looking to his security were taken as in my mind seemed expedient and wise. Nor did I disclose them to him—he desired to be a simple American gentleman, for a little time, so I did not regard it as necessary. He should have his way—be a free man once more so long as he stayed in this country, if I could effect it. But I hoped for a quick departure and safe return. Somehow I was nervous, very nervous.

I confided my fears to Moore but did not get much encouragement from him. He was too much like his chief—of the devil-may-dare order. He only laughed at my concern, and told me I was fighting phantoms. Alas! how I wished for Bernheim—Bernheim the careful and phlegmatic. He would have seen matters in their proper light. As it was, I had two hot-heads to caution to prudence with not a single restraining influence to aid me. The imprudence, I admit, consisted in doing the usual and in ignoring Lotzen, but to me that was the height of folly.

However, I did prevail on Armand, the following

morning, to permit me to inform the Valerian Ambassador.

"You know Baron Von Empfield intimately, I believe," he said—"well, bring him here, but don't tell him who he is to meet."

"It is a bit difficult to order an Ambassador around—he is not at one's beck and call," I observed.

"Tell him anything, except of me," he replied. "You can manage—he is coming at your solicitation, not because I want him—and let him be here not later than eleven o'clock to-morrow."

"Your Majesty commands," said I, a bit sarcastically.

"That is the prerogative of royalty—it doesn't always succeed in being obeyed, however." Then he laughed. "I'm curious to see Von Empfield's face when he is presented. He is such a dignified personage. Now I'm going to bed—where I advise you to go also, Dick. It's after two o'clock, and late hours are bad for the digestion of old fellows."

The next morning, I called up the Ambassador and, on the plea of indisposition and a matter of great importance, made bold to ask him to come to the hotel at eleven o'clock. To my gratification, he was exceedingly polite about it, and expressed much concern over my ill-health. He was going to the State Department on business, he said, and it would give him much pleasure to stop on his way to see me.

Prompt on the minute, he was announced. I welcomed him on the threshold.

"It was kind of you to come, my dear Baron," I said. "My physician forbids my going out—though why I can't imagine—can you?"

"The ways of a physician, my dear Mr. Courtney, are past finding out—by a layman," he answered. "You seem perfectly well."

"I am perfectly well," I said, "except that I am considerably disquieted over a matter—a matter of great importance, as I have said, and of vital interest, I think, to your country. We will go into the library, if your Excellency please."

At the door, I stepped back and bowed him into the room.

The King was standing with his back to the light, and the Baron did not recognize him. He saw only that there was a strange man in the room, and waited for me to present him, assuming that he had to do with the business in hand—which he had, though it was a very different sort of business from what the Ambassador supposed.

For my part, having brought the Baron before his Majesty, I considered my work done. I stood back and waited.

The King remained quiet, however, and Von Empfield after a short pause turned to me questioningly and with just a faint show of impatience.

"The whole matter is in charge of Mr. Smith," said I, with a wave of my hand in his direction. "He will discuss it with your Excellency."

This did not please the Baron and he showed it.

"Who is Mr. Smith?" he demanded. "I do not know him."

"Not by that name possibly," said Armand, stepping forward so that the light from the window fell full across his face, and holding out his hand.

At the words Von Empfield swung sharply around, and when his eyes fell on the King's face, he stared like one who beholds a vision yet doubts that he sees.

"No!——it cannot be——" he exclaimed, in a half whisper.

"What cannot it be?" said Armand smilingly.

At the sound again of the voice the Baron seemed the more bewildered, and turning to me, in vague distrust of himself, he asked:

"Who is this man?"

"Your King, my lord," said I. "Your King."

Then Von Empfield found his knee.

"Sire!" he exclaimed. "Your Majesty will——"

"I'm not 'your Majesty,'" said the King, taking Von Empfield's hand and raising him to his feet. "I'm plain John Smith."

"I don't understand," the Baron apologized. "We received no notice of your Majesty's intended visit."

"Because no one in Valeria knew it except her Majesty. Oh! Mr. Courtney has told me several times that I should have apprised you of my coming—he looked as incredulous, when he first saw

me, as you did, Baron. I ran away—eloped with my former self, so to speak—and for a week or two I am going to enjoy it."

"You are here incognito——"

"I am—strictly incognito. No word must get back to Valeria."

"As you wish, sire—naturally, the Embassy will entertain you as you may direct."

"I am not going to the Embassy," the King replied. "General Moore and I shall stay at this hotel with Mr. Courtney."

"Is General Moore your only attendant?" Von Empfield exclaimed aghast.

Armand nodded smilingly.

"One might fancy from your expression, Baron, that you question his ability to take care of me."

"And he would fancy correctly, *n'est ce pas?*" said I, turning to Von Empfield.

The latter raised his hands expressively, but made no response.

The King laughed again.

"Don't take it so to heart, Baron—you won't be responsible if anyone stabs me or sets off a bomb in my vicinity."

"I was thinking of the Queen, sire, if I may be permitted," said the Ambassador—"and what she would suffer if harm came to your Majesty."

He had struck the one note to which Armand was responsive. I saw him hesitate—here, was my opportunity.

"The Duke of Lotzen is in Washington and knows that the King is here," said I.

"Good God!" Von Empfield exclaimed. "Lotzen here!"

"In this very hotel," I replied.

"And your Majesty is aware of it?"

"Yes—his Highness did us the honor of visiting our table," the King replied.

Von Empfield looked at him appalled.

"And yet your Majesty thinks of remaining in this hotel! Surely you will come to the Embassy?"

"It seems all that is necessary to produce a panic among my friends, is to mention the name of the Duke of Lotzen. One would think he were the Devil."

"He is," said I.

"Well, be that as it may," the King smiled. "You seem to forget that his aim is the Crown. I am only one who is in his way. Dehra and the boy are much more formidable impediments than is your humble servant. However, just to make you rest easier and feel that your solicitude is not wasted, I'll go to the Embassy—but I'll go incog, and Heaven help the fellow who forgets it."

"At last!" I exclaimed.

"I show a glimmer of intelligence, you think," he said. "Well, I can't say as much for you, Courtney."

"I'm not concerned," I laughed. "Lotzen isn't camping on my trail."

"And he has yet to demonstrate that he is camping on mine. I'll go with you, Baron, but it is upon the distinct understanding that all I get is a bed and board when I'm there—not a change in anything and no deference shown me. I came over here to be a plain American for a short time, and I'm not minded to change. Is it understood?"

"Whatever your Majesty wishes is our law," bowed the Ambassador.

"No, it isn't!" said he. "His Majesty wishes to be treated as if he were John Smith, but you and Courtney won't have it."

"Nonsense! You're very well pleased that we are concerned about your safety," I said bluntly.

At which Armand laughed, and Von Empfield looked tremendously shocked at my temerity and want of respect.

To the latter, the King was ever the King—to me, he was Armand Dalberg ever, and King sometimes; and this was not one of the times. Armand was the most lovable, the noblest, the bravest, the most reckless man I have ever known. On occasions he was also the most headstrong—a quality which had come down to him from Hugo the first American Dalberg, who was the banished son of Henry the Great of Glorious Memory. It was when this headstrongness was combined with his recklessness that I forgot he was a king, and remembered only that I loved him and wanted to punish him like some self-willed boy.

"I'd be better pleased if you would let me look out for my own safety like an ordinary mortal," the King answered.

I smiled, and held my peace.

"I don't see how it is possible to conceal your Majesty's identity from the Staff," the Ambassador interposed.

"I dare say you can't—but you can caution them not to talk."

"Lotzen knows—who else matters?" said I.

"Lotzen doesn't matter—he won't babble."

I laughed sarcastically. "You're concerned only in maintaining your incognito."

"I'm concerned in being let alone. Are you willing to try it, Baron?"

"Whatever your Majesty wishes," was the reiterated answer.

As a result, the King and Moore moved up to the Valerian Embassy. Moore in his real character, the King as an American who was accompanying him. And the secret was still a secret—save from Lotzen, Spencer, and Bigler, and such of his old friends as Armand was pleased to tell.

Lotzen was still at the hotel. I had passed his fair companion and him in Peacock Alley several times; always to be greeted by a dignified bow from the latter and a dazzling smile from the former. I saw the admiring looks and the stares that followed her, and I did not blame them. She

was the most beautiful woman, save one, that I had ever seen, and she radiated the sort of fascination which draws men like the sirens of old. As she passed along the corridor, their talk would cease and they would watch her, as if bewitched by her transcendent loveliness. For not a shadow of the true self behind the mask was disclosed—unless the temptation to violence and pristine love, which she engendered, could be so interpreted.

And looking at her as she seemed and as she was, I did not wonder at her power over the Duke. Her mind and her body held him as enthralled today as when they had enmeshed him five years ago. And knowing Lotzen, and what manner of man he was, it but accentuated her power. If she had chosen the path of the virtuous, rather than the path of the courtesan, what a glorious woman she could have been! Verily——

However, it is not for me to fling a stone. She satisfied Lotzen. He was still infatuated, madly infatuated, in his cold, calm way. He was content. It was no concern of mine what she was, so long as she did not cast her baneful beauty upon my friends or me.

Count Bigler, too, I had noticed in the corridor, accompanied also by a fair companion, of the French variety—one of the Maxim sort, I took it. A very pretty woman—young enough to be fresh and daring, yet old enough to be learned and adroit in all the ways of the world. I should have

known her nationality had I but seen her hold up her gown. Your French woman does not think her hosiery should be hidden from an admiring world. As a result, her immediate vicinity was thronged with men whenever she appeared—and to her credit or discredit, depending on the point of view, be it said she never disappointed them.

I neglected to say, the King had stipulated that Lotzen should be subjected to no espionage. He did not intend to show enough interest in him to spy on his movements. And though I protested, it was useless. Of course, I might have ordered it done anyway, but as a matter of good faith it was not to be considered. As a result, Lotzen departed without our knowledge on the evening of the third day. We were not aware of it for thirty-six hours, and then I learned of it only by accident. I told the King while we were swinging briskly out toward Sheridan Circle, on our morning walk.

"You see—it was all unnecessary, this taking precaution!" he laughed. "I'm not the important individual I was once, before Frederick's decree and my marriage to Dehra. Then I stood in his way directly, and my death seemed to assure him the Crown and the Princess. Now the Princess is a Queen-regnant and there has come to us a son who is the Heir Apparent—duly recognized. It would profit him little, under the circumstances, to have me killed."

"Except for revenge," said I.

"Didn't we agree, long ago, that Lotzen wasted no time in revenge?"

"We did—when revenge was merely incidental. Now, however, according to your view, fate has left him nothing but revenge."

"And according to your view?" he asked.

"It would lift him one life nearer the throne—with only two lives intervening—one of them an infant, the other a woman. The Prince dead, it would settle down to which would outlive the other."

"With both the Prince and me dead, I fancy Dehra wouldn't be greatly concerned as to who comes after. And if she is, there is always the Book of Laws, and a new decree regulating the succession. Lotzen's brother Charles is in line."

"The Family Laws of the House of Dalberg are exceedingly handy," said I.

"As handy as the Family Laws of the House of Hapsburg!" he laughed. "And just how handy they are, will be proven when Franz-Joseph dies, and the new Emperor, Franz-Ferdinand, enters a decree making his wife Empress and their children legitimate. Indeed, I'm not so sure that Franz-Joseph himself hasn't already entered it, to be disclosed upon his death—so as to relieve his nephew of the responsibility."

"I'm inclined to think it will make something of a row in the family—they won't tolerate it."

"I do not see what the family has to do with

it," he said. "They are bound by the Laws—there is no appeal from the Emperor's decree. It is the same with the Dalbergs."

"And I fancy there wouldn't be much opposition in Valeria," said I, "if Lotzen were taken absolutely out of the Line of Succession."

"I don't know—he has his friends."

"But you wouldn't say that he has any following."

"Again, I don't know. Every one has his following—and it is very much a question whether his absence doesn't increase it. I've had my share of the disagreeable to do, and it has not augmented my popularity in some quarters. The reorganization of the Army and of the Navy, which I found necessary after the death of Frederick, the Van Dusen scandal in the diplomatic service, and the reform in the administration of the Home Department, all brought their share of enmities. A native-born Dalberg could have managed it, possibly, without making enemies, but the American could not—at least, I did not. There are those in the kingdom to-day, and their number is not small, who would be glad for a chance to strike back. Of course, they can accomplish nothing openly—except to put themselves in prison—but they are not above taking a chance at me, if the opportunity ever come. It is a natural animosity for the foreign ruler, who exposed them, broke up their cliques, and introduced new methods."

"The new methods are, I dare say, their main reason for hating you."

"And because I'm a foreigner,—'an American with the American ways,' as Count Epping early explained to me. He helped me to put them through, however. I should never have succeeded but for him—and Dehra's backing."

"How is the Army now?" I asked.

"Except for some of the higher officers and those who were lifted out of their commissions by the new laws, I think it, as a whole, is glad for the change."

"Are you not unduly sensitive over the fact that you're a foreigner?—hasn't the slight prejudice, which may have existed at first, long since worn away?"

"Possibly—in the main, yes. But there are some who will never forgive—they are Lotzen's partisans."

"And as effective as the partisans of Napoleon in France, or of Don Carlos in Spain," I scoffed.

"Oh! the Crown is safe enough, so long as Dehra and the boy live. In natural events they will outlive Lotzen. If they should predecease him—who cares what follows?"

This was characteristic of the man and accounted for much of the recklessness in his disposition. Who cares?—What matters it? had been his way from the beginning. Not that he paraded it, however. Far from it, indeed. But to me and one or two in-

timates it was revealed. Dehra had detected it almost immediately, and had combatted it wherever possible—notably in the Ferida Palace adventure, and in the entry by night into Lotzen Castle. In the former, she accompanied him—and served him by proclaiming herself when Bigler and his bravos were about to make an end. In the latter, she went herself—disguised as a man and attended by Moore—unknown to Armand, penetrating Lotzen's stronghold, springing his trap prematurely, and, by a piece of shrewd generalship, escaping unharmed from the Duke's very hands.

There were numerous other occasions, of course, which she knew not of, or knew not until after they were over, but he ever came out of them uninjured and undefeated. So much so, indeed, that he seemed to be invincible, and Lotzen's schemes made only for his triumph. All of which had its effect on public opinion in the times five years ago. And even Lotzen's adherents came finally to believe that the American was unbeatable. His striking resemblance to the Great Henry, his opportune coming to Valeria, his reception, his betrothal to the Princess Royal, with the events subsequent terminating in the Decree of Restoration and the Crown, were too much like an inevitable destiny to be disregarded. And Armand himself had, I think, some such idea—and acted on it. At least, his recklessness became not so much recklessness as a fulfilling his fate, doing his duty to the occasion,

shirking no danger nor responsibility, taking things as they came—"riding straight," as he put it, whether the going was rough or fair.

We were crossing Florida Avenue, when an automobile, that had been approaching at very moderate speed, swung over without warning toward us, and suddenly putting on all the power made straight for the King, who happened, at the instant, to be a pace in front of me.

I shouted and leaped back; but it was too late for warning had not Armand seen his danger and like a flash sprung, not directly across the path of the car (if he had, the car would have struck him), but at an acute angle to it, thus gaining a little space.

The car flashed by, the driver bending over the wheel, eyes straight ahead—and the King went down before it.

I gave a cry; the car sped on—and Armand rose to his feet, brushing the dust from his clothes.

"My God!" I exclaimed. "I thought you were killed."

"So did I!" he laughed. "It was a close call—the front wheel hit my foot and threw me. That chauffeur must be drunk."

"Did you get the license number?" I asked, turning to the detectives.

"There wasn't any number on the car, sir," said one.

"Would you recognize it, or the driver, if you saw them again?"

Both men shook their heads.

"The driver, possibly—the car, no, sir."

"Arrest him if you can find him," said I.

"Don't bother," the King interrupted. "You can't arrest every reckless chauffeur on suspicion—you would have the entire profession in jail, if you did. Shall we continue the walk?"

"If you feel inclined."

"You must think I am easily disconcerted!" he laughed. "Pretty soon, you will be imagining that my dear cousin, the Duke of Lotzen, was the chauffeur."

"Oh! no, I shan't," then I stopped. "I believe you have it," I said.

"Have it?—have what?"

"Lotzen."

"I wasn't aware of it," said he. "May I ask where I have him?"

"Don't become facetious," I retorted. "It's not becoming. Comedy rôles don't suit you."

"No—I'm cast for the heavy dramatic," he smiled.

I refused to be diverted.

"That automobile was inspired by Lotzen," said I.

"Then he blew it along at a pretty fair clip."

"Quit trying to be funny," said I. "You know what I mean—he was back of this attempt on your life."

"Heavens! man; don't attach so much importance to an every-minute occurrence. As long as

there are automobiles we shall have crossing accidents. I just missed being one of the accidents. Let us be thankful for the miss."

"It was a deliberate attempt to run you down. I could see it plainly enough from where I stood. Else why did the driver so suddenly put on speed—why did he swerve toward you, rather than away from you—why was the license tag missing from the back of the machine—why didn't he stop when he saw you fall?"

"The last is plain enough to me," said Armand; "he didn't stop because he didn't care to. No! no! Courtney, you are assuming that the chauffeur is a creature of reasonable purposes, intelligence, and instincts like ordinary mortals. He isn't. He is a crazy irresponsible without sense or method other than the impulses of the moment."

"I grant all that you say respecting chauffeurs—and as much more as you care to say—and you can't make it too strong, but that has nothing to do with the case in point. This fellow was so extraordinarily rational in his actions that he must have been obeying orders. He meant to kill you, and he came within an ace of doing it."

"For which ace then let us be duly thankful!" said the King.

I saw that he did not believe me—but my mind was not changed. It was Lotzen's doing, I was sure.

And it was proven a little later, when, having

circled, we were returning by way of Connecticut Avenue. It was an early spring day, bright and balmy, and all the town seemed to be at play. The parks were filled with children, the sidewalks were gay with the throng of pedestrians, the motor cars were racing by with their humming monotone. I was kept constantly bowing to acquaintances, until, at last, the King took off his hat and carried it.

"It's easier—and it saves the hat," said he. "Better do likewise."

"I'm not a king. I can't be eccentric and set a fashion," I answered.

"Which shows how independent I am."

"Because, not knowing you are a king, every one will think you are a damn fool."

"Because I'm with you?" he asked.

"No—because you look it!" I answered.

He laughed, and put on his hat.

"I'll relieve you of the suspicion so far as the hat is concerned," he said as we reached the wide intersection at S Street and started to cross.

Suddenly a car shot out of the press on the Avenue, turned into S Street, and was upon us before we could move. I saved myself by a sharp stop, but the King, who was nearest the car and a few inches in advance of me, would have gone down before it had he not seized the fender and drawn himself up on it, his legs wiping me as they went by. Instantly the machine slowed down,

as though to stop. Armand dropped to the ground. As he did so, the driver opened the throttle and sped away. All had occurred in an instant, and before the detectives, who were a little way behind us, could come up the car was flying down Twenty-first Street—the same car and the same chauffeur that we had escaped but a short time previously.

When we had got away from the crowd which had gathered instantly, and the King had wiped the dirt and grease from his clothes, I suggested that we take a carriage at the stand in Dupont Circle.

"Why should we?" he asked. "I'm not tired—are you?"

"Yes!" said I. "I'm tired to death of dodging automobiles that are inspired."

"Nonsense, Dick! We will keep a sharp look-out at the crossings. You made him the same driver?"

"Certainly! Will you admit Lotzen complicity now?"

"Perhaps——"

"Two attempts in an hour by the same man ought to be convincing even to you," I said. "Though, possibly, you must wait for a third attempt and your funeral—to accept it."

"Why be so lugubrious?—let us omit the funeral."

"It won't be your fault if it's omitted," I answered.

"Whose fault will it be?"

"Chance—good-fortune—destiny."

"Just so!" he said, and although he spoke lightly I saw he was in earnest. "Chance! good-fortune! destiny!—whatever you choose to call it—will protect me from Lotzen and his machinations. I've won thus far—I shall win to the end."

"You're more likely to win if you use ordinary prudence," said I.

But he only laughed.

"Destiny! Courtney, destiny!" he answered.

IV

MISS DE MARCELLIN

If Lotzen was in Washington the detectives failed to locate him, as well as the chauffeur, though they made every effort to find the latter—at my direction; Armand would not be bothered.

The second morning after the occurrence, while I was going over my mail and dictating answers to my secretary (I had a secretary, though I really did not need one), the King telephoned:

"Lunch with me in the palm garden of the hotel at one-thirty to-day," he said. "There is something I want to show you. Marmont will be there, too."

"Something you want to show me?" I repeated. "Has it to do with Lotzen?"

"You can't get away from Lotzen, old man!" the King laughed. "No, it hasn't the slightest to do with him—I forgot that he existed."

"It's a pity he doesn't return the compliment," said I.

"And that some other people don't do likewise," he retorted.

"I wish I could."

"Try—it is astonishing how one can cultivate a habit."

"It is," said I meaningly.

"You don't believe in my star?"

"I'd believe more in it if it influenced you to exercise a reasonable amount of prudence and common sense."

"What is the use, when your friends exercise it for you? In Valeria, Bernheim's occupation would be gone, and here you wouldn't have a thing to do but to look pleasant."

"I'll try to look pleasant to-day," said I.

"And I haven't a doubt you'll succeed—you'll be rather an exception, if you don't."

"Why?" I asked.

"I'll see you at one-thirty," said he, and rang off.

I resumed my letters. I should be relieved when he was on his way back to Valeria. There may be those who will think I was officiously concerned with his safety—and that a king is amply capable of caring for himself. But it must be remembered that I loved Armand like a son and, moreover, I held myself responsible for him while he was here. True, he had come uninvited, but he had come *to me*. Moreover, he was incognito, which meant that he incurred all the dangers of a king without having any of a king's protections—for Lotzen knew. Furthermore, there also may be those who think I was obsessed by Lotzen. To them I say, I knew Lotzen, and of what he was capable. It was not an obsession—it was a fact which had been demonstrated many times.

"What is it the King wants to show us?" Marmont inquired, as we met in the corridor, a minute before the luncheon hour.

"I haven't an idea," said I.

"He is a bully chap!" he exclaimed. "I think I shall have to look in on Valeria this summer. It's not often that you can ring the front bell at a palace, and slap his Majesty on the back, and tell him you're glad to see him looking so well."

"No, it isn't often," I answered.

"He has asked me to visit him some time, and I think I shall accept."

"You're more foolish than you look, if you decline."

"Thanks for the compliment—I'm not thinking of declining."

"Then we may meet in Dornlitz. Lady Helen and I are going there some time during the coming summer."

"And you will be at the Palace?"

"Possibly—at least, for a time."

"Can't we make it at the same time?" he inquired.

"We can try," I smiled.

"I'm a trifle new to kings and queens, and the ways of Court, and you could steer me around the shoals, so to speak."

Marmont was a good fellow—a bachelor with plenty of money, and sufficient leisure to spend his income—educated, travelled, cultured—and with

age enough to steady him. He had had his fling, and had settled down to sober ways.

"There is his Majesty," said I, as Armand appeared at the far end of the corridor.

"Who are the women with him?" asked Marmont.

"I haven't the slightest notion," said I.

"They look pretty good to me," he remarked.

"Especially the younger!" I laughed.

"Right! my friend! she is some looker!—a princess, at the very least."

"To my eyes she looks like an American," I said.

"No!—a princess, sure!—observe her walk, and the way she carries herself—and the——"

"Pretty fair for a first impression!" I smiled. "Sounds like a knock out."

"Sounds that way to me, too. I hope she's going to lunch with us."

"Armand said he had something to show us, you'll remember."

"By jove! I wonder——"

Just what he wondered, he did not disclose. They were within hearing distance.

"Mr. Courtney and Mr. Marmont," said the King, "I want to present you to my cousins, Mrs. De Marcellin and Miss De Marcellin."

Marmont attached himself to the latter, as we went in to luncheon—and the King, observing, smiled slightly to me.

"He always did like a pretty girl!" he remarked.

"He is a sensible chap," said I,—"and Miss De Marcellin is considerably more than pretty."

"Yes—I reckon she is," he answered. "I thought I'd show him something."

"You did—and me, also."

"You're married, old man."

"That doesn't hinder me from admiring a fine bit of art or a beautiful woman," said I.

Presently he remarked:

"Caroline, I think I'll take you and Hildegarde back to Dornlitz with me next week—will you go?"

"To Dornlitz? Oh! this is so sudden!" laughed Mrs. De Marcellin.

"So was my finding you here sudden."

"We can't possibly get ready in a week."

"What do you think about it, Hildegarde?" he asked.

Hildegarde looked up from a running fire of conversation with Marmont.

"What did you say, cousin?"

"I asked what you thought about it."

"About what?"

"Your mother says that it is impossible for her and you to go back with me to Valeria, next week."

"To Valeria! With you!—the King! Oh, Mother! think again! please, think again!"

"Just what I hope she will do," said Armand. "You see, Mr. Courtney and Lady Helen, his wife, are to be our guests, and when I walked into you on the Avenue this morning, I thought what a fine

"AND MISS DE MARCELLIN IS CONSIDERABLY MORE THAN PRETTY"

idea it would be to have you, too. I have not quite forgot my American relations, though it may have looked so. The last time I heard of you, you know, you were in the heart of India. You two are my nearest kin—the others are too far out to count. You're a widow, Caroline, with only Hildegarde to think of. So, as she says, think again."

"And you think what it will mean to visit in a palace without any clothes," said Mrs. De Marcellin.

"It's a serious matter," said he gravely.

"And we don't know anything about what we shall be expected to do."

"Be natural—forget that Dehra is a queen and that I am a king. Remember only that you are Dalbergs."

"I think, cousin Armand, that mother is changing her mind," Miss De Marcellin observed. "It's not as impossible as it once seemed, is it, Mother?"

"I suppose it might be managed," said Mrs. De Marcellin, with a laugh. "But we shall have to hustle. When do you wish to sail—not before the end of next week?"

"We'll make it as you wish. I'll look out for the accommodations, and you and Hildegarde can devote your undivided attention to shopping."

"Will we stop in Paris?" Hildegarde inquired.

"I'm afraid not!" laughed Armand. "But you can have a day in London and the shops of Bond Street and Regent Street."

"Oh! I can manage to get along—and we can run over to Paris occasionally, I suppose," said Hildegarde.

"Certainly!—Dornlitz is but twenty-four hours from Paris on a fast train."

"Delightful!" exclaimed Hildegarde.

"People have found it so, I believe," said Armand dryly.

"Are there any shops in Dornlitz?" she asked.

"You may find a few," was the amused answer.

"I think it can be managed, cousin," she said, with a quiet little nod.

And Armand nodded back, then fell to describing Dornlitz to Mrs. De Marcellin.

"You were one of cousin Armand's friends from Pittsburgh, I believe," Hildegarde remarked to Marmont.

"I was one of *his* best friends," said he modestly.

"You can take his invitation as proof of his regard for you," she answered.

"I'm glad to know it from such reliable authority."

"I remember his speaking of you often, and of his other good friends there."

"You flatter us," he said.

"There is no flattery in fact, sir," she answered, with a sidelong glance.

"I may accept that as an infallible truth?" he asked.

"Always!" smiling.

"I shall remember——"

"But it must be a self-evident fact, or else be undisputed," she cautioned.

"I understand," with a significant glance. "It is a self-evident fact."

"I'm glad you're going to Valeria," she said naïvely.

"So am I," he replied. "More glad now than ever."

"Because I shall be there? Oh! Mr. Marmont —how nice of you."

"I shall try to be even nicer there."

"You've made a very good beginning, sir."

"I'll make a better ending," he said low.

"But why make an ending—why not prolong the beginning?"

"That shall rest with you."

"Why with me?" she asked mischievously.

"I'll tell you some evening in Valeria—may I?"

"Perhaps!—I'll tell you some evening in Valeria, if you may."

"That is a tentative permission?"

"No; merely—not a refusal."

"It is enough for hope," he answered.

She gave him a bewitching smile.

"I like hopeful people," she said.

"You do?"

"They take a 'no' more gracefully—are not cast down by defeat."

"And hence are more likely to be successful?"

"Sometimes—they are, and sometimes they are not. It depends on the occasion and the man."

"How about the woman?"

"Upon her, most of all!" she laughed. "Would you find fault with her, sir?"

"I should never find fault with a woman."

"No?" she inflected.

"It is useless—quite useless. The recoil always gets the man—and the recoil comes last."

"You have experienced the recoil?" she asked sweetly.

"Not at all!—it's merely a theory——"

"Oh!"

"——that is demonstrated every day," he ended.

"Poor woman!" she sighed.

"Poor man!" he sympathized.

"You're safe," she retorted. "You confess to having experienced it only in theory."

"I *have* been safe," leaning over toward her—"I'm so no longer."

"Then I advise you not to come to Valeria."

"Maybe I'm willing to risk the recoil."

She laughed. "When do you think of coming?"

"When do you think of going?"

"I'm going with cousin Armand."

"I'm going with him, too, if he asks me. Couldn't you intimate to him that you would like to have me along—sort of a door-mat, or a football, or a punching bag?"

"Certainly I could—but I *won't*."

"And yet you want me."

"I said that only to be polite—to make conversation."

"And I suppose your last remark also is only to be polite—to make conversation."

"Not especially—it happens to be the truth."

"The two remarks are not conflicting—you can still be glad I'm going to Valeria, even if you won't ask the King to take me with him. Just a bit of modesty, on your part, I understand."

"It's always so satisfactory to have to do with one who *understands*," she retorted.

Then the King addressed me, and I heard no more of their chatter.

"Well! what is your opinion of Miss De Marcellin?" I asked Marmont when the meal was over, and the De Marcellins and Armand had departed.

"More profound than ever."

"It seemed to be rather buoyant than profound," I said.

"It's both, and the intermediate stages also. Courtney, she is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"You haven't seen the Princess—I mean the Queen—nor Mrs. Courtney," said I.

"True—so I've done them no discourtesy."

"But you *have* seen Mrs. Spencer."

"As a work of art, possibly, Mrs. Spencer is more perfect to look at. I'd rather *live* with Miss De Marcellin."

A man brushed by us and went on down the corridor. He was tall and a trifle heavy, his hair was red, his face florid, his features clean cut.

"Do you remember that fellow?" I asked.

"No," said Marmont, after a moment's inspection of his back.

"It is Count Bigler—'Lotzen's Jackal,' the King calls him."

"I thought the Duke and his two friends had departed."

"It seems that one at least has returned."

"And Lotzen?"

"They are never very far apart."

"Bigler knows you?" he inquired.

"He has seen me frequently enough in Valeria—he knows me, certainly."

"Then he is not trying to hide himself."

"I should rather think he is trying to exhibit himself," said I.

"Why?" he asked.

"If I knew, I could guess the next move in their game."

"You think that they have a game?"

"My dear Marmont, do you think that the devil is ever idle?"

"But why should Lotzen lie quiet for five years, and then suddenly resume the old tricks?"

"You'll have to ask Lotzen," I said. "Enough for me that he has resumed them."

"The automobile?" he persisted.

"The automobile," said I.

"You have no direct evidence that Lotzen inspired the assaults."

"It would not be Lotzen, if I had. He doesn't leave direct evidence—he is not such a bungler."

"He seems to have bungled the attempt for the Crown," Marmont remarked.

"He lost, but it was not through any fault of his, I can assure you. He was so close to winning it was only a matter of seconds that he failed. And the odds against him were tremendous—how tremendous, only those familiar with all the details know."

"Are not the odds even greater now?" he persisted.

"No," said I. "The opportunity now presented to kill the King is totally unexpected—furthermore, new conditions have arisen in Valeria, which you will understand better when you get there."

"Are not the King and Queen as popular as ever?"

"Not among the grafters and the professional politicians—the King's hand has been heavy, and they hate him much. And, as many of them are people in high social position, they have raised a party whose opposition is to be reckoned with. Like their class in this country, they are totally without scruple and will hesitate at nothing."

"Are they strong enough to overturn the government?"

"No—in that sense, they can't overturn the government, but they may be able to remove the King and the little Prince, and so make Lotzen the next in the Succession."

"And Lotzen would stand for that?"

"With the utmost pleasure."

"The Queen may marry again," Marmont objected.

"There will never be another child. Prince Henry was the first one and the last."

Marmont looked at me but made no comment. I saw that he understood.

"The Queen is younger than Lotzen?" he asked.

"The Queen is about twenty-eight, Lotzen about forty or forty-five."

"And there is no danger of her being deposed."

"That is a very safe guess," said I.

He nodded. "I think I appreciate the situation now. You want to take Armand out of danger and get him back to Valeria."

"I was in the struggle from its very beginning —in fact, I was responsible for Armand going to Valeria by having him detailed as my attaché when I went as Ambassador. And so, having been in the thick of it all, I am going to stay in it to the end—if we have not reached the end—and to my mind, we will reach the end when Lotzen dies or is killed."

"Then, here's to his demise!" said he, raising his hand, as though it held a glass.

"Drink!" said I. "Drink hearty, and with feeling. A greater rogue never drew breath—nor one more suave and polished."

"And while we're about it, we might as well drink to being in at the death."

"I'll drink that, too," said I.

"Whee! but you're blood-thirsty!" laughed Marmont.

"You must have gone through all that is past to understand," said I. "Moreover, I don't want to participate in the actual killing—only to be present."

"Sort of a vestal virgin at the show—with thumbs down."

"There won't be any occasion for thumbs down," said I. "Lotzen is not one to ask for mercy."

"You talk as though you actually think it is likely to happen," he replied.

"I do," said I—"the end of the struggle is to come."

"I hope it will come when I'm there—so I can see the last act."

"Don't be flippant," I cautioned. "It will be tragic enough, I assure you."

"Judging?"

"From the prior acts and the principal characters, particularly the villain—and there will be plenty of action, too."

"You make me impatient for the last act to begin," he said.

"You think you will be in it?" I asked.

"I hope so," said he.

"That sounds well, my Pittsburgh Club friend, very well indeed," I scoffed. "What do you know of fighting, may I ask?"

"I've done my share," he answered—"at tea fights, and receptions, and bank directors' meetings."

"All very good in their way, but scarcely brisk enough for Lotzen——"

"I was half-back on my college team," he added.

"That's more like it—it may help you to qualify."

"Where do *you* come in?" he inquired, looking me over with smiling impertinence.

"At the brain business—where you wouldn't qualify. I'm a 'smeller-out' of plots."

"Before or after?"

"Both," said I.

"But more especially *after*—— There's your man Bigler again," he added, nodding down the corridor. "Rather a pretty bunch of skirts he has in tow."

"The woods are full of pretty skirts," I said.

"I wouldn't object to meeting this one in the woods!" he laughed. "Who is she?"

"I don't know the baggage," said I.

"She's a screamer for looks," Marmont repeated, watching her with a preoccupied air that would deceive no one.

I glanced up as they passed. Bigler bowed with sweeping grace. We did likewise. The lady flashed us each a look half quizzical, half contemplative —then threw another over her shoulder at Marmont.

He raised his eye-brows, and smiled.

"She's *chic*, all right—and French," he said. "I reckon he brought her with him. Is he married?"

"I think not," said I. "But if he is, it's not to her. Come on, I want to see something!"

"Sure!" he replied. "I've no objection to looking at her again."

"You're not married," said I—"you may look and welcome."

We hurried down the corridor and up the steps to the exit, just in time to see Bigler and his companion whirled away in a touring car. And the car resembled exactly the one that had tried to run us down—only, the chauffeur was not the same. This time the number was in place. It was 777.

"Whose car is that?" I asked the footman.

"It is one of the hotel's, sir," he answered. "I don't know the gentleman's name. He's a foreigner, sir."

V

ARMITAGE

For a moment, I thought I had stumbled on a clue—the next moment, I saw my error. It was not "our" car, so to speak. Lotzen would not have bungled so miserably. He had probably hired a motor from any of the ordinary garages, which always have them on hand with or without a chauffeur. As the King had insisted that nothing be done to ferret out the matter, my hands were tied.

"I'm going home next week so it is no good stirring up trouble for me, for that is what it would amount to," he had said. "I'll look out for myself, with your help and the protection of the dogs who follow me. I'm not afraid of being injured."

"No—that is the difficulty," I had replied.

And now, when I mentioned Bigler and his fair dame to him he only shrugged his shoulders and bade me be easy.

"If he has a woman with him he won't have much time to bother with anything else—particularly if she is as ravishing a houri as you have described. He and cousin Ferdinand seem always to pick up a pretty assortment, don't they?"

"Pretty—in both senses of the word," I replied.

"I wonder if Bigler has ceased trying for Spencer?"

"Or Spencer has ceased playing Bigler for Lotzen's benefit?"

"The new one is French, you say?"

I nodded. "Marmont called her 'chic'—but she is much more than chic—she is the whole brood."

"And the old hen, besides!" he laughed. "Well, the more she occupy him, the less time he will have for your plot. Anything of Lotzen?"

"No," said I—"at least, I haven't seen him."

"Then he is not in Washington, we may be sure—and it is only a bit more than a week till his opportunity departs. We sail on Thursday of next week."

"*Deo volente!*"

"You seem to be relieved."

"I shall be, when you're gone."

"Better go on the same ship," he suggested.

"To take care of you?—Thanks! I've quite enough of a job here, without taking trouble on shipboard."

"You know you enjoy taking care of me!" he laughed.

"I do," said I. "Much as a father enjoys taking care of a son. The difference is that he can flog the boy into obeying him, whereas——"

"You can only stand by and swear."

"Exactly!"

"You're a bully fellow, Dick. I love to hear you fussing over me and——"

"——doing as you please," I cut in.

"I'm a king!" he exclaimed.

"You're more of the heedless boy than a king," I retorted. "For instance, what did you mean by telling Marmont that you had 'something to show' him at luncheon—and then produce Miss De Marcellin?"

"Just what I said—Isn't she worth seeing?" Armand inquired.

"Of course she is—that is the difficulty. She is too much worth seeing. Marmont is mad about her."

"I thought he would be," said the King serenely.

"You wanted him to be!" said I.

"No!—I don't interfere with two people who are quite capable of taking care of themselves."

"You just bring them together, start the trouble, and then sit by and laugh—as you're laughing now."

"If Marmont wants Hildegarde——"

"Is that why you brought them together?" I asked.

"Not exactly," said he. "I've known Hildegarde since she was a child, and I like her. I also know Marmont well enough to feel that he is sensible, decent, well-born and rich. I'm going to take Hildegarde and her mother back to Valeria with me. She will make a—sensation there, both be-

cause she is beautiful and because she is a cousin of the King. She will have suitors in plenty among the nobility—so many, indeed, she is apt to get her head turned a bit. I want to have a good, substantial American handy for her to compare them with—and who is fit to marry her in the end, if she want him."

"And if he want her," I added.

"I think Hildegarde can be trusted for that," he said.

"Who can be trusted for her?"

"God knows! A woman's way is past finding out. And when one comes to anticipating it, even God is in the dark. Marmont must help her to the solution he desires."

"In that event, I suppose, you're going to ask Marmont to accompany you to Valeria."

"Of course, I am—that is the object—to start them off."

"Well, give yourself no concern on that score," said I. "They're off!—at least Marmont is, and going fast."

"I fancy we also can trust Hildegarde to keep him going!" the King laughed.

"I miss my guess, if by the time Dornlitz is reached it hasn't got him gone," said I.

"You mean a mutual gone?" he asked.

"If Marmont can make it so."

The King shook his head.

"She will be so full of the nobility she is to meet that she will not let herself go quite so far."

"And if she elect to remain in Valeria?"

"Marmont has his chance. No man may ask for more."

"It is to be a fair field and no favor—after you get to Dornlitz?"

"It is—I'll see to it, however, that if Hildegarde does choose from among the Valerians, she doesn't choose wrong."

"Where do you prefer her to choose?" said I, with curious interest.

"Here!" said the King instantly. "She is born and bred an American. She will be happiest here. The Continental ways are not our ways." He laughed. "I forgot, I'm a Continental, now. I mean *your* ways, the American ways, of course. That is why I want Marmont handy. He is a representative American gentleman, moderately handsome and with wealth and culture. He will serve to remind her that there is something else than uniforms, quarterings, and a coronet."

"Uniforms, quarterings, and a coronet are tempting bait for a woman," I reminded him. "Why not leave her in America?"

"Possibly it might have been wiser. But, you see, she invited herself: 'Aren't you going to ask me to Dornlitz, cousin Armand,' she whispered, just as we met you—and what could I do? I had thought simply to see if Marmont's phlegmatic

nature could be stirred by the sight of a girl like Hildegarde. As it is, however, Marmont has become a sort of sheet anchor. However, the girl's good stuff; I think we may trust her to be true to herself—whatever that is," he added with a smile.

He paused a little (we were in my library), knocked the ashes from his cigar, and studied the coal.

"I'm about ready to go home," he said—"to Dehra and my crown. To my love and my work. I'm bored stiff here, Dick."

"I'm glad to hear it," said I. "The strictly incognito is a mighty poor business, except for sneaking around after dark in the disreputable district."

"I've seen all the friends I care to see," he went on. "The places don't interest me. The clubs are the same—drink and gossip, and gossip and drink. Society is the same—every one is climbing over some one else, the limit is—Oh, damn it all! I'm going back to my job. It's not such a bad job, after all. When I come again—if I ever do—I'll bring Dehra with me, and we will tour the country."

"That will be after Lotzen's demise," I said.

"Just when have you arranged for him to die?" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Why this sudden panic?" he said. "I've had five peaceful years, during which I never thought of Lotzen."

"Because your secret police did the thinking for you—they and the Princess—I mean, the Queen."

"You may be right!" he laughed.

"You know that I am right," I declared.

"In the last week, Moore and I have been down to Mount Vernon—I wanted him to see it—besides, I had never been there myself."

"Very proper place to go," I said. "Congratulations on your escape."

"And we walked all through Rock Creek Park—and over to Fort Myer—and down to the Navy Yard—and through the Capitol—and we even climbed the Monument."

"And are here to tell the wonderful tale!" I scoffed. "If you had ventured to the White House and the Corcoran Gallery you would have been daring indeed."

"What does Bigler seem to be doing?" he inquired, as he arose to go.

"Nothing," I replied—"except amusing himself and the lady."

"Pleasant occupation!" he laughed. At the door he paused. "Can't I persuade you to take the voyage with us—I've engaged a cabin for you, if you want it."

"Next Thursday, you say?"

"I have to give the De Marcellins time to collect a few clothes—otherwise it would be this Saturday. You can cable Mrs. Courtney to join us in London, and we will all go on to Dornlitz together."

"I'll do it!" I exclaimed, after a moment's thought.

"I shall feel safe, if you're along!" he laughed.

"That is the very reason I'm going," I retorted. "I'm glad it is understood—if it *isn't* appreciated. When I turn you over to Dehra I shall consider my guardianship at an end."

"Come along!" he said good humoredly. "Take a walk up the Avenue and get some fresh air. You'll feel better then. Von Empfield has been in a sweat also, since I've been on his hands—he'll have nervous prostration, if I'm here much longer. I shall see that he is granted a special leave, when I get home. That is one thing I like about being a king. I can have my own way, and no one ever questions it—except you and Dehra——"

"And we're generally right," I added.

As we left the hotel, we came face to face with Bigler and his inamorata. Bigler drew aside respectfully, and raised his hat in salute. In courtesy, the King could do nothing else than raise his in acknowledgment, but he looked at the woman while doing it.

She being apprized by the Count's manner that Armand was some one of high rank, and herself appreciating that he was uncommonly handsome and of distinguished appearance, deliberately looked him in the eyes and smiled.

"Who is he?" we heard her ask.

Bigler's answer was not distinguishable.

"She is a bad one!" was the King's comment, "but a dream for looks. She and Spencer will make a pretty pair together; two beauties, the dark and the fair. It's queer how Lotzen's and Bigler's kind always run to women of that sort."

"They are rich enough to be connoisseurs," said I.

"Connoisseurs—of face and figure!" he laughed.

"And of evil," I added.

"By the way," he said, "I think I'll run down to the Eastern Shore to-morrow—to Armitage, the Dalberg place near Easton—better go along."

Now it happened that I had a cousin who had recently bought a large estate near Easton, and had often pressed me to visit him, but the convenient occasion had never arisen. It never would arise, likely, for I hated visiting. Here, however, was a good chance to see him, without being obliged to stay more than the night. My excuse would be that I had accompanied a friend who could not remain. I dislike to hurt even a relative's feelings, you see, by undue haste in departure.

"If you don't stay more than one night," I stipulated.

"One night will be long enough for me," he returned. "I still own Armitage. It always descends to the eldest male, and we have let the heirlooms, so to speak, remain in the original house—as in Hugo's time. The miniature of his father,

however, I took with me to Dornlitz, you remember."

"I do," said I. "You exhibited it to the King, when he recognized your kinship, and you—kissed the Princess."

He laughed in recollection. "And was promptly punished for my temerity!" Then he went on: "I want to get Hugo's original diploma of the Order of the Cincinnati, and his Journal—which he kept from the time of his banishment until his death—to take back with me to Valeria."

"Why don't you take his sword and commissions also—they are yours?" I asked.

"Well, maybe I will. And maybe I'll leave them in Armitage, and give it, with all its contents, to Hildegarde for a wedding present—if she marry an American."

"You would better tell her of your intentions," said I.

"I shall—in time," said he.

The next evening saw us at Armitage—a house built of English brick, with wings on either side, set in a grove of magnificent beeches that extended a quarter of a mile to the water front. We approached by boat, and the place was indescribably beautiful, with the fading sun glinting on it through the leaves, and turning the River into molten gold in our fore—for Armitage is on the Choptank, and not on the Bay.

I was glad Armand had persuaded me to spend

the night with him; then we would both lunch with my cousin on the morrow, if convenient, and take the night train back to Washington.

"It is charming!" said I enthusiastically.

"It *is* pretty," Armand answered. "Would you believe it, I haven't been here for ten years? Dalberg of Armitage or Dalberg of Valeria! I don't know which I'd rather be."

"But as you're both, you don't need to choose —you are a fortunate chap, my friend."

"I suppose I am, in the way you mean," said he, "but I care nothing for them, except as they can give pleasure to Dehra. She is the one thing that makes life worth while. I'm going back to her convinced of it, Courtney!"

"That is the American in you," I said. "You are in love with your wife—and you are proud of it. Yours wasn't a *mariage de convenance* for State purposes, like those of your fellow monarchs."

"No! thank God." Then he laughed. "It is well we are almost at the landing. I am becoming sentimental—and anything but a sentimental man of middle age."

"There is one worse—an old man—myself, for instance."

"Do you ever get sentimental?" he asked.

"I don't know," said I, laughing. "You'll have to consult Helen."

Armitage was in charge of Fitzhugh Johnston,

Armand had told me, his cousin on his mother's side. No one had been apprized of our coming, so, of course, no one was at the landing to greet us. We dismissed the boatman, and went up the avenue to the house.

"There is Fitzhugh—on the porch," the King said—indicating a man, who was sitting in one chair with his feet in another reading a paper.

He glanced up, as we ascended the steps—and we saw on his face in quick succession, question, doubt, surprise, incredulity and amazement.

"Hello, Fitzhugh!" Armand called. "Don't you know me?"

"I know who you ought to be," said Fitzhugh, getting up and coming forward, "but I can't believe——"

"Can't believe your eyes, hey?—well, look again!" was the King's answer, as he took the other's hand.

"Major!—I mean, your Majesty!—I'm delighted to see you."

"You had it right the first time. His Majesty is in Valeria. I'm just plain Major here, old fellow." He introduced me. "How is Katharine?" he asked.

"Well, thank you. She's gone to Baltimore. I'll have her back to-morrow evening."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. I'm only down for the night—to see the old place again, and show it to Mr. Courtney. Not a word to anyone of my

being here until after next Thursday, when I'll have sailed for home. Queer thing, Fitzhugh, to call any place but Armitage home!"

After supper we sat in the library smoking, while Fitzhugh rehearsed the tale of the crops and the plantation. I knew that the King was not interested, but no one could have inferred it from his manner. Apparently he was as concerned as though his income depended wholly on the profits arising from the place. After the talk had spun itself out, and Fitzhugh seemed willing to pause, Armand pointed to the wall behind me.

"There is the diploma," he remarked.

"I noticed it," said I.

"Fitzhugh, where is Hugo's Journal?" he asked.

"Where it always has been—there, in the corner book-case," Fitzhugh answered, springing up to get it.

He went straight to the place indicated, swung back the glass doors, and reached in. Then he gave an exclamation.

"Why, it's not here!" he said. . . . . "It's nowhere in the case!" he added, a moment later.

"Maybe it is in one of the other cases," Armand suggested.

A careful search failed to disclose it, though they hunted through them with much care.

"It has been years since I've seen it," said Armand, "but as I remember it is bound in leather, and is about so big"—indicating.

Fitzhugh nodded.

"Yes," he said—"and pretty well the worse for age and——" He stopped abruptly. "Hell!" he exclaimed. "I know where it is! Those men stole it."

Armand looked at him inquiringly.

"What men?" he said.

Fitzhugh came over, and sat on the edge of the table.

"Last week, or maybe it was the week before, two men were here; one of whom said he was interested in genealogy, and asked to see Hugo's Journal—to look it over and get various facts from it. They were plainly men of the world, very well-dressed, and acted like gentlemen. I got the Journal for them, and the one took it to the desk here and went through it—making notes from time to time. The other conversed with me. It grew toward evening—and I, of course, invited them to remain for supper. They accepted without urging, which I regarded as another evidence of good breeding. In due time, the Journal was returned. I put it back in the case where it belonged—and thought no more about it, until you asked for it. But it is all plain now. I was, I remember, called out a moment to the front of the house, and then is when they stole the Journal. It was my fault, sir; I've been shamefully careless. I am——"

"Tut! tut! Fitzhugh, you couldn't know they were crooks," said Armand. "Think no more about

it, please. There is no great harm done. It was valuable only for sentimental reasons. Report the theft to the police to-morrow—they may recover it."

A sudden idea occurred to me intuitively—like a woman, if you please.

"Can you describe the men?" I asked.

"In a general way," he answered. "They were about thirty-five or forty, I should imagine. One was tall, well built, with red hair; the other, the genealogist, was about the Major's size, with dark hair and, I think, a moustache, cropped close. He was somewhat older than the other."

"Did they speak with a slightly foreign accent?" I went on.

"Now that you suggest it, I believe they did, though it was not particularly noticeable."

"Don't you recognize them?" I said to Armand.

"I confess that I don't!" he laughed.

"Consider!" said I—"one was tall, well built, with red hair, the other was about your size, with dark hair and moustache—and both spoke with slightly foreign accent. With whom do the descriptions tally?"

"It can't be possible!" he exclaimed.

"It is a peculiar coincidence, at all events," said I.

"What object could they have in stealing Hugo's Journal?"

"What object could Lotzen have, you mean?" said I.

"Of course," said he.

"I have no idea—but, be assured, *he* has an idea, and judging from the past a very well-defined idea. You said the other day, you will remember, that it wasn't in pursuit of you, nor to see the country, that he came to America. Might it have been to obtain Hugo's Journal?"

"Granting that it was to get the Journal—why—why? For the life of me I cannot understand."

"Not knowing what is in the Journal, I, of course, can't understand."

"Fitzhugh, have you ever read it?" asked Armand.

"I'm sorry to admit I haven't," said Fitzhugh, who, while he had not understood our talk, was too well-bred to ask an explanation.

"I read it when I was a boy," said the King; "and I glanced over the first portion, dealing with Hugo's reasons for leaving Valeria, before I went there five years ago, but I can recall nothing but a very plain account of the main incidents of his life. I'm sure there was no reference to anything that could be construed as even questionable. There were the facts of his service as an officer in the Revolutionary War, his marriage, his purchase of Armitage——"

"It may be that," I interrupted.

"The purchase of Armitage?" said Armand wonderingly.

"No—his marriage. Where else is there any evidence of its date?"

"In the marriage register of the parish—at White Marsh Church, I suppose. They were married by the rector of that time, I remember the Journal says."

"Do you know if that register is in existence?" I inquired.

"I do not, but I reckon we can ascertain in the morning."

"Is there any other contemporary evidence of it?" I persisted.

"None that I know of." Then he laughed. "Aren't you making something out of nothing?—Lotzen won't dare attack Hugo's marriage."

"Lotzen will dare attack anything. It will have its effect if he but raise the question, and you not be able to refute it conclusively. It goes right to the heart of the matter—your legitimacy. A very serious thing, when a throne hangs on it. Let him but suggest that your grandfather Armand was not born in lawful wedlock, and you will have to answer him. The presumption of regularity which runs with ordinary individuals is, I apprehend, put to a severer test when applied to royalty. It does not rest on tradition nor belief. In such a case, there may be no uncertainty—if the King's title is impeached all authority is empty."

"In theory you are right—but in this particular case, I think, you over-state the danger. Dehra is

the Queen, in her own right. I am the King, and united in authority only by her grace. Remove me utterly, and she and the boy remain. Moreover, I am not so sure the presumption of regularity in descent does not run, when there is no *evidence* to the contrary. Hugo lived in America, he was married there, his children were accepted as legitimate by his friends and neighbors who would know the facts. In other words, the American standard must govern the proof of an American marriage."

"I was giving my idea," said I. "At all events, he will raise a nasty question to handle. It will make trouble—and for *you*—and that will be sufficient to repay Lotzen."

"Frederick's decree of restoration specifically provided that 'the marriage of Hugo shall be deemed valid and lawful.' I think they are the exact words," said Armand.

"The *marriage*, yes. But if there were *no marriage?*" said I. "And Lotzen will insist that there is no direct evidence of one, and that consequently it devolves on you to prove it."

"Frederick's decree and the presumption of one hundred years will prove it," answered the King. "I'm not afraid."

"We were simply considering what might have been Lotzen's object in coming here, and what the result might be," said I.

"My dear Dick," he interrupted. "I under-

stand you—it is only a supposititious case. Moreover, we still have the register to consult in the morning, and the record of the marriage is doubtless there."

"Do you remember the date of Hugo's marriage?" I asked.

"I do, strange to say. It was on Christmas Day, 1784. I suppose it was the Christmas Day that caused it to stick in my memory, when I saw it in the Journal."

In the morning, on the way to my cousin's place, we stopped at the church to inspect the register. Fitzhugh was along. The rector was a new man in the vicinage, and did not know Armand. It was arranged that Fitzhugh should introduce me, as the one who wanted to look up a marriage.

It happened as we had anticipated; and, while Fitzhugh engaged the rector in conversation, the King and I turned quickly to the place in the ancient leather-bound book, now sadly dilapidated, where the record should have been.

But it was not there. And though we searched for five years back, and as many forward, we could not find it.

At last I turned back to the place where, according to the date, it should have been. The pages were not numbered, so their consecutiveness could not be determined, but bending the book back, until it cracked and threatened to fall apart, a small bit of paper was disclosed clinging to the cord which sewed it together.

"That," said I, pointing to it with my finger, "tells the tale. The page has been torn out."

Armand put out his hand and plucked away the bit of paper.

"Yes," he said—"the page is gone."

I turned to the rector. "Mr. Chew, there were two men here, a week or two ago, who were much interested in this register, were there not?—a tall red-haired chap, and a trifle smaller, dark-haired one. Both spoke with a slight foreign accent. Do you recall them?"

"Perfectly, sir," he replied. "And very charming gentlemen they were. Their names have escaped me, I'm sorry to say. Do you know them, Mr. Courtney?"

"Oh, yes,—I know them quite well!" said I. "Very clever men," I added. "Very clever, indeed."

VI

MLLE. DE VARENNE

We said nothing of the theft to Mr. Chew, and after a little talk we departed, having cautioned Fitzhugh, who left us here, not to divulge the matter to any one.

"It is perfectly plain," said I. "The Journal mentioned the marriage and the fact that it was performed by the rector of White Marsh. The Duke's next step was to visit the church and steal the record from the register."

"And cousin Lotzen stepped!" commented Armand. "I reckon we are remitted to the presumptive evidence—if it is required."

"It will be required," I said. "You know, quite well, the Duke didn't go to all this trouble just for the love of old records."

"It isn't reasonable," he laughed. "But when he springs his trap I shall spring one, too. When I have told the story of the disappearance of the Journal and the page from the register, I think he, also, will have something to explain."

"True enough, he will," said I. "I wish we had also a contemporary record for him to explain."

"Hum!" he muttered, and fell to thinking. . . .

"I wonder," he said, presently, "I wonder if the Maryland Historical Society can help us out in any way. It may have some family diaries, or something of the sort to aid us—some mention of the wedding. A wedding was an event, in those days, you know. It went into the diary of every one who was invited. Now, I fancy, Hugo's wedding was something of an affair even then. His career and his history were notable; and he married Betty Chamberlayne, daughter of Colonel George Chamberlayne, one of the prominent men of Maryland, whose plantation adjoined Armitage."

"It will do no harm to stop off in Baltimore, and it may do much good," I said.

The next day saw us at the rooms of the Society, on Saratoga Street. I did the asking; Armand remained the on-looker.

The librarian was very courteous and polite, and went to much trouble to search everything he could find—but without avail. He suggested, however, as a last resort, that the *Maryland Gazettes*, of the period, might contain a notice of the wedding, and that, if I cared to investigate, I would find them in the State Library at Annapolis.

So we continued on to the ancient city. And there, in the Court of Appeals building, in a metal case, under lock and key, we found the precious *Gazettes*—and what we sought.

In the issue of the seventeenth of January, 1785, was this notice:

"*On Christmas Day, last past, were united in the Holy Bonds of Matrimony, Miss Elizabeth Chamberlayne, only child of Colonel George Chamberlayne of Ashland, Talbot County, a Lady endowed with every Virtue and Quality which go to make the marriage state prosperous and happy, and Colonel Armand Dalberg, of Armitage, in the same County, a gallant soldier, Colonel of the Huzzar Legion in the late War for Independence, sometime Aide to his Excellency General Washington, and nearly related to his Majesty the King of Valeria.*"

"I think that will fix my dear cousin's game!" Armand chuckled.

"It will checkmate it!" said I.

"There is no such thing as taking this with us, I suppose," tapping the *Gazette*. (The issues of two years were bound in one volume.)

"None whatever," I answered. "But you can have a certified copy, duly sworn to and attested."

"We will have all the seals in Maryland on it," he replied.

And so, when we left Annapolis, he took with him a copy of the notice, with the librarian's certificate attached, verifying under oath that it was a true copy, taken from the *Maryland Gazette* of January 17th, 1785, now in his official custody; and containing the further certificate of his Excellency the Governor of Maryland, made under

the Great Seal of the State, that the affiant was the State Librarian, and, as such, the publication in question was in his official custody.

"Something of a document to prove what no one in this country would ever doubt," said Armand.

"Nor any one in Valeria, if it were not for Lotzen's devilish plots," I replied.

"He is fighting Fate, I tell you," he declared. "Look you! by what a chance we discovered the loss! A mere fancy to take the Journal to Dornlitz with me—the theft is disclosed—you, by a stroke of intuition, guess that Lotzen is guilty—we prove it—we find the *Gazette*, by sheer accident. Don't you believe in my star now, Courtney?"

"I shall believe more in your star when Lotzen is dead—and you are alive," I answered doggedly.

"You're a miserable sceptic, Dick, a miserable sceptic!" he laughed. "But we shall see."

"Yes, we shall see," I agreed. "Please God! it will not be your obsequies we see."

We returned to Washington in time for a late dinner, which the King thought he would eat with me, if I cared to have him. The Embassy bored him to extinction, he said. Moreover, Moore was ostensibly the distinguished guest, and he only detracted from his glory. I was delighted to have him stay, of course, and we went up to my quarters. The evening's mail lay on the table in the reception room, placed there by Hobbs after my secretary had departed. I picked it up and glanced

over it, while Armand went on to the bathroom to clean up. One letter, addressed in a woman's stylish hand and marked "Personal," piqued my curiosity. I opened it first.

It contained a single sheet of plain paper and an unsealed envelope. On the sheet was written a request to deliver the envelope—and on the envelope were the words:

"To His Majesty the King of Valeria."

I gave a short whistle of surprise, looked at it a second time, then placed it carefully aside and went on with my mail. When the King reappeared, I gave it, and the letter that came with it, to him.

"This came in that," I explained.

"Hum!" said he. "I'm not as incog as I thought."

"Which doesn't surprise you greatly, I imagine," I replied.

He did not answer. He was reading the note. In a moment he looked up.

"Listen to this," he said. "It's in French——"

"If you want to be sure I understand it, I advise you to translate," I interrupted.

He smiled and complied.

"*Thursday* ——

"*Sire:*—

"*If your Majesty wishes to hear something which nearly concerns you (I do not know whether it threatens your life or only your crown, or whether*

it threatens neither—you will know, or subsequent events will disclose, but I think it is aimed at both your life and crown), you will come alone to the Café Republique, at three o'clock on Friday afternoon. Ask for Mlle. de Varenne. You will be shown to a private room, where I shall be waiting, also alone. I need scarcely say to your Majesty that this is neither a trap nor a rendezvous. I am trying to do you a favor, and I think I am, though I may be mistaken."

"That is all," he ended. "There is no signature."

"Is any signature necessary?" I asked.

"I could make a guess who wrote it, but then I might be wrong."

"Well?"

"The blonde lady, who is now posing as the Countess Bigler, is French, I take it."

"Just so," said I.

"Why should she write to me?" he reflected.

"God knows! Ask me something easier. It seems to be a favorite ruse with them—Madeline Spencer played it, you remember, and lured you on to Lotzenia with the false Book of Laws."

"Hence, why should it be tried again?"

"Possibly for the very reason that you will think it won't be tried again."

"What possible danger can there be at the Café Republique, at three o'clock in the afternoon?"

"No possible danger—that we know of," I said. "And therefore——"

"Dick! Dick!" he laughed. "You're always suspecting a trap——"

"——and therefore," I continued, "it behooves you to be on your guard, if you keep the rendezvous—and, of course, you will keep it."

"It is not a rendezvous," holding up the letter. "I shouldn't keep a *rendezvous*—it is not seemly in a married man."

"And married men do only what is seemly!" I scoffed.

"Some married men do everything that is seemly," he replied.

"And some do not," I said significantly. "What shall you do?"

"What do you advise me to do?"

"Keep the rendezvous by all means," I answered.

"Are you serious?"

"I never was more so. Keep the rendezvous—but be mighty shy of whither it leads."

"Suppose it doesn't lead anywhere—suppose it is just informatory."

"Then be shy of the facts presented—remember they're presented by the enemy."

"Maybe they are—and maybe they are not," he replied. "I will admit I'm curious."

"To be too curious is hazardous. Curiosity, you know, killed the cat."

"A cat," he corrected. "We don't know how many cats it has saved from being killed."

"There may be something in that aspect!" I laughed.

"However, I won't be rashly curious to-morrow," he answered, with an indulgent smile.

I now come to a place in my story—and shall come to similar places, hereafter—where it will be necessary to chronicle incidents in which I did not participate either as an actor or as a spectator. Therefore, it seems best that I should tell them impersonally, having obtained the facts from those who did participate, taking care to be accurate and, at the same time, endeavoring to do justice to everyone. Much of the righteousness of an action, as well as its justification or nonjustification, depends, I am aware, upon the point of view of the narrator, and while I was a partisan of the King and the Princess—I mean the Queen—nevertheless I have tried to set down the facts as they were given to me at the time, or as I learned of them subsequently from various sources, believing that as they fit in with the rest of the tale in every particular they are true, also, in the least particular.

At precisely three o'clock, the following afternoon, the King got out of a motor in front of the Café Republique, crossed the pavement and entered the restaurant. A moment later Moore, walking, followed him, and took a table in one corner. Armand meanwhile had been approached by the head waiter.

"I have an appointment with Mademoiselle de Varenne," he said in French.

"*Oui, Monsieur,*" bowed the head waiter, and continued also in French. "She is expecting your Excellency. Permit me to conduct you to her," indicating, with another bow, the elevator.

At the second floor, he bowed him out, and to a door at the far end of the corridor.

"Mademoiselle is within," he said, and stood aside.

"Thank you," said the King,—dismissing him with a gratuity out of all proportion to the service rendered, and which set the fellow to bowing again in an exaggeration of servility—and knocked lightly on the panel.

"*Entrez,*" called a sweet voice within.

The King entered and closed the door.

A young woman arose and curtsied profoundly.

"Sire!" she said, and curtsied again.

It was as he had thought—she was Bigler's fair companion.

"We will drop all that, if you please," he said.

"What shall I call you?" she asked, with an ingenuous smile.

"Mr. Smith," he replied. "It's short and easy to remember."

"And easy to forget, *n'est ce pas, monsieur?*" she laughed.

He bowed slightly.

"Be seated, please, Mr. Smith," she said, and

let herself sink with studied carelessness into a chair, seemingly all unconscious that she was exposing a pair of very small feet and a swelling length of black silk stockings above them—quite a way above them, indeed.

The King sat down; let his glance linger a moment, man-like, on the vision just under his eyes, then shifted it inquiringly to her face.

"You must think me perfectly horrid, Mr. Smith," she said.

"I should not call it so," he replied. "Perfectly ravishing would be much nearer the truth."

She looked at him through half-closed lids. "I do not quite understand, monsieur."

"A woman usually knows her good points—and does not usually let a compliment go astray!" he smiled.

"It did not go astray, monsieur, believe me, it did not go astray," and arising, for an instant, she shook down her skirts.

"It is a pity to hide so much beauty from an appreciative world," he remarked.

"Monsieur Smith!" she exclaimed reprovingly. "Nevertheless, I thank you," she added.

He laughed. "You are American," he said. "I thought you were French."

"Because my note was in French?"

"No—because you held your skirts like one, the other day."

"When you saw me with Count Bigler?"

"I didn't notice whom you were with."

"*Merci, monsieur!*" she replied.

He smiled.

"This is pleasant badinage," he said, "but time passes, mademoiselle, and, with your permission, I must hasten. What have you to tell me?"

"Much—that I may not tell—this isn't a rendezvous," she replied, with a quick glance upward.

"And what that you may tell?" he asked.

Undeniably, she was chic, and fascinating besides —as all such women are, who are of the aristocracy of their class.

"I don't know how much it may tell you, monsieur—it depends on how much you know, and how much you are able to infer."

"I think you can trust me, both to know and to infer," he said.

"I am glad," she replied. "I despise a too modest man at such a juncture."

"The inference then would be that you don't despise me!" he laughed.

"She shot him an inviting glance from her blue eyes.

"Your inference is not forced, monsieur," she answered.

"In that event, and since we understand each other, let us get on with the tale, mademoiselle, let us get on with the tale."

"I forgot—I but consume your time." Then, when he did not answer, she went on: "Let me

go back a little, to make the situation clear. I am an old friend of Madeline Spencer, but I had not seen her for years until I met her six months ago, on my return to Paris from a prolonged absence. She introduced Count Bigler and we became —friends—at once. From Madeline and him I learned of the situation at the Valerian Court, and of the Duke's hatred for you. Frequently with Bigler I visited Dornlitz, and twice we went on to the Castle of Lotzen. What his business was did not appeal to me—I did not know whether he had any business, beyond looking after his own affairs; though this was more a languid assumption than knowledge. I enjoyed myself, and was furnished with an ample income, so the doings of my lord did not interest me. I am not like Madeline—she loves to dabble in affairs—I let them absolutely alone. We are of different natures—I do not know which is the happier; I am fairly satisfied with my way—she with hers. I have been the more successful in holding men—for she never held anyone securely until she hooked the Duke of Lotzen. Oh! she is beautiful, monsieur—for so you were thinking, I read it in your eyes—more beautiful as a statue than am I, but not half so responsive nor so alluring.

"Then one day a month ago we sailed for America, and the Duke and Madeline went on the same ship. I thought we were going on a pleasure journey—and we were, but we were also going for something else. We landed at New York and

went to the Ritz. The gay white way—with its shoddy imitations of Paris, its ill concealed debauchery and grossness, so unlike Paris in the actual, which is never vulgar in the refinement of vice—we trod from end to end, with a lavishness that must have been unusual even there, if the stir we made when we entered a restaurant or appeared in a box at the theatre was any indication.

"It was in a burst of confidence, superinduced by too much champagne, that the Count told me, one night, what was being done. It seems your whole life in America was being investigated for some vulnerable point that Lotzen could attack—and they hadn't succeeded in finding a single thing that would serve. Suddenly, a week later, the atmosphere cleared—or seemed to—and the Count told me that they had hit upon it; and that, if it came out as they anticipated, they would guarantee you a very pleasant reckoning. It might not make the Duke King, he said, but it would remove you from the throne. And when I asked him to explain, he laughed, and twitched my ear, and told me to wait. Then, for two days, the Duke and he were absent. When they returned, the Count was jubilant. That night he drank much and boasted to me of their success:—they had found that which would tumble you from your high estate, and make you wish that you had never seen Valeria.

"Two days after, we came to Washington—to find you, whom they supposed to be thousands of

miles away, in the same hotel. It gave them something of a start, I assure you. The Duke and Bigler were in consultation until late that night—the former did not know what course to adopt, Bigler said. Your appearance here had changed the whole matter for them. I listened casually—the affair did not interest me then. As I have said, I am not interested in 'affairs.' On the second night, the Duke and Madeline left suddenly for Europe——"

"For Europe!" the King exclaimed.

"Yes, monsieur—they sailed on the *Lusitania* the following day. You are surprised?"

"I'm surprised at nothing Lotzen does," he replied, with a smile—though his mind was busy. This sudden departure boded ill.

"You have had experience," she reflected. "I understand."

"What has developed since?" he asked.

"Haven't there been two tries for your life—and two narrow escapes?"

"The motor car?"

"I do not know—but weren't there?"

He nodded. "With your confirmation, suspicion becomes certainty. Are there more coming?"

"Here?"

"Yes."

"I do not know certainly. Nor do I know if any await you in Valeria, or elsewhere—but I fear so."

"And that fear is based upon what?" he asked.

"Upon remarks, disjointed and disconnected, which the Count dropped from time to time—coupled with the threat to tumble you from your high estate, and with the Duke of Lotzen's hasty departure for Europe. Altogether, it seems to me to be exceedingly suspicious," she ended.

"That is all that you know?" he said.

"Everything—is it not enough?"

"But why tell it to me? You say you are not interested in affairs."

"I was not—before I saw you!" she smiled.

He laughed. "Why should my affairs interest you even after you have seen me?"

"For obvious reasons, monsieur."

He bowed. "And for what other reasons?" he persisted.

"The other reasons are immaterial—be content with what I have given you."

"Are you quite sure, mademoiselle, that the other reasons are your own or another's?" he asked.

"Another's?" she echoed—"I do not understand, monsieur."

"Are you quite sure that the other reasons are not Madeline Spencer's?"

He thought to catch her, but her expression changed not a whit.

"You admit it, mademoiselle——"

"Admit it! How ridiculous!" she laughed. "I may not admit what is not the truth."

"And the only reasons you can give for warn-

ing me are myself—and others which are immaterial."

"Exactly! The milk of human kindness in me has not dried up completely."

"Particularly the immaterial?" he went on.

"If you must have it—yes!"

"And the immaterial reason is Madeline Spencer?——"

"We are arguing in a circle, monsieur—moreover, I did not say so."

"No—you did not *say* so!"

"Will you tell me why *she* should wish to aid you?" she demanded.

"Possibly because she also has seen me!" he laughed.

"Then why didn't she conduct her own information bureau?"

"A natural question—and best answered by her," he replied, and arose. "You can tell me no more, mademoiselle?"

"Alas! I cannot."

He regarded her a moment in silence, while she looked up at him invitingly.

"Does Count Bigler know of this warning?" he asked suddenly.

"No, on my honor!—or what is left of it," she answered instantly. Then—"You're not going, monsieur?"

"Such was my intention," he answered. "I must be off."

He laid a roll of money on the table.

"With my best thanks," he said.

"Can't I persuade you to remain a little longer?" she said, with a tempting smile, that was both thanks and invitation.

"I am afraid not, mademoiselle,—business presses—I must away."

"Even if I have something else to offer?"

"You have not told me all?"

She shook her head, and the sunlight from a nearby window spun her hair to gold.

"Not all, monsieur. There is much more that I *could* tell you, if you would but listen——" She paused suggestively.

The King was puzzled. What was her game? Was she sent by Lotzen or Bigler to entrap him into some indiscretion with her? Was she acting on the suggestion of Madeline Spencer? Was she playing the arts of the woman against the amorous instincts of the man—the man who chanced, also, to be a king—to lure him to a liaison? It was one of the three, but which?

And she, instinctively reading what was in his mind, flushed with sudden anger, that as quickly died.

"It is no more than I should anticipate—that you would doubt my motive in giving you this information," she said. "You are a king—and a king is more tempting and alluring to a woman than ever we women are to men. Money, jewels,

everything which makes life worth the living are within a king's generosity; and are we to be blamed when we try to win them?"

"I am not blaming you," he answered. "That I do not respond, does not imply blame."

She leaned forward, both hands upon her knees.

"Perhaps it is unbelievable, but nevertheless it is the truth when I tell you that, for once in my life, I thought to do a service to other than myself. I wanted to warn you, because Bigler and Lotzen and all their class had no good word to say of you —and because you were an American gentleman. And then, when I saw you—I wanted to warn you all the more, for you are a kingly King. So I wrote the note; and while I did, for the moment and for my own amusement, try to charm you with my beauty in the only way that remained for such as I to do, am I to be despised because I failed?"

"My dear young lady, I do not despise you," he replied. "A woman is justified in using whatever means nature has given her. To you it has given sensuous beauty and—a past. It is your ammunition for the war of life." He paused and extended his arm. "Shall I escort you down, mademoiselle?" he ended.

"No!" she said. "We best go alone—for, this time, I am no one's confederate. But, before you go, let me confide this further information: the Duke of Lotzen has gone straight to Dornlitz."

VII

KORONA TOKAJI

"WELL," said I, as the King and Moore walked into my apartment a little later, "I see that you have escaped, without material damage."

"I've escaped without any damage," replied Armand, as he lighted a cigarette and chose a big chair by the window—"unless you construe the temptation of a very handsome woman, with a devilish pretty pair of ankles and a fine disregard for the elevation of her skirts, as damaging."

"Hum—m!" I said. "I refer to physical damage, not moral. I'll leave the moral for Dehra to inquire about—her views on the matter may be more controlling, I take it, than are mine."

He laughed softly. "She is very fetching, Dick, very fetching, indeed!"

"I am quite ready to believe it—and that she is very willing besides."

"One might infer so," he replied, with a reminiscent smile.

"That I'm very ready to believe it, or that she is willing?" I inquired.

"That she is willing, my dear Dick, that she is willing."

"I suppose I might also infer who the alluring damsel is?"

"You might, but I won't put you to the trouble. Mademoiselle de Varenne is Bigler's companion."

"And she told you?" said I.

"Very little that we do not already know, except one thing. Where do you suppose Lotzen has gone?"

"Give it up," said I. "With the whole United States to wander over, I wouldn't even guess."

"What is the last place on earth you would guess?" he asked.

"To church," I answered instantly.

"That's very right!" he laughed,—"and what's the next place?"

"A convent."

"A convent?" he exclaimed.

"I mean a monastery," said I.

"Which is better—but you're wrong still. He has gone to Dornlitz."

"To Dornlitz!" I cried.

"So Mademoiselle de Varenne says."

"But does she know—does she speak the truth?"

He flicked the ashes from his cigarette thoughtfully.

"That is the question," he said—"but I think she does."

"You think she does, but you do not know," said I. "This comes from your foolish policy of not having him watched. We can not even be sure whether he has left the country, or is still here."

"I wouldn't dignify it as a 'policy,' old man,"

he remarked. "It is not becoming in a diplomat."

"I was dignifying it because it is a king's," I retorted. "Otherwise——"

"You would call it—bumble-puppy!" he laughed.

"Bumble-puppy would be quite mild," said I,—and laughed too. One could never be long out of patience with Armand. Moreover, it was his affair, not mine—though I was prone, through love of him, to forget it.

"On consideration of your not calling it what you think it is, and thereby superheating the atmosphere, I'll tell you the rest of the aforesaid damsel's story," the King remarked. . . . .

"You were right," said I, when he had finished; "Lotzen didn't know of your presence in this country. When he did know of it, he left for Dornlitz straightway. Can you imagine why?"

"I cannot—beyond the fact that he is up to some rascality."

"How is he to cross the Valeria border? Hasn't he been banished?"

The King shook his head. "Not formally—simply an intimation, by the Head of the House, that his presence in the Kingdom is not deemed essential. It amounts to the same thing, but it is not a public decree which is enforced by the authorities, of their own motion. It is a family matter. Moreover, he may go in disguise."

"To Dornlitz?" I asked.

"Certainly! why not? The Ferida Palace is still his—and so long as he committed no overt act against the Government, nor made himself known, we should likely do nothing. His position is rather *non grata* than that of a banished subject."

"He is not going to Dornlitz to remain passive," I objected.

"Then the Government will act or not, as it sees fit—depending on the circumstances." He tossed his cigarette out the window and lit another. "On the whole, if he wishes to put up a fight, he may be gratified. I am not disposed to be kept always on the *qui vive*. I had hoped it was to be peace between us—but, if it is to be war, war be it. After all, it may be the best solution. Evidently, he will never become reconciled. He will always be a menace. So I'd best try to make an end. How does that strike you, old scrapper?" he smiled.

"As very admirable—if successful," said I.

"What do you think of it, Moore?" the King asked.

"It makes me feel five years younger," was the reply.

"Trust an Irishman to encourage a fight!" I laughed.

"It seems to me you're something of an Irishman yourself," the King returned. "You said I made a mistake by not killing Lotzen when I had

the chance, and urged me, if the opportunity came again, not to let him escape a third time."

"I did," said I; "but I did not urge you to seek an opportunity by deliberately provoking a contest."

"How else shall I get an opportunity?" he asked. "Lotzen's methods are of the days of the dagger and the rapier——"

"And the automobile," I interrupted.

"Just so—he uses whatever period suits his plan. His versatility and adaptability are marvellous. Moreover, I cannot forget that he has some justification for his implacable hate. But for me, the Princess and the Crown would both be his. I came out of the West and deprived him both of his birthright and of his expected bride."

"Shall you wait now until next Thursday to sail?" I inquired.

"Yes—I've invited the De Marcellins and given them until then to be ready. And besides, I'm not to be hurried by a tale which may not be true. De Varenne may be a tool of Lotzen—probably is—though I confess I am disposed to believe her. We will journey to Dornlitz as per schedule; and then, if our cousin has preceded us with malicious designs, we will essay to meet him."

"You're an Irishman, too, in spirit," said I. "You are positively chuckling over the prospect of another go at Lotzen."

"No, Dick, I'm not—but, like you, I have always thought that it is bound to come some time, so I'm

relieved that the time seems to be here. It ends the suspense, so to speak. I wonder how much longer Bigler will remain—I didn't think to ask the lady."

"It depends on whether he knows of the lady's tale to you," I said—"and whether he is to make another try for your life. It is, however, safest for you to assume that the affirmative is true in both cases, and to act accordingly."

"As an assassin, he is not a success," the King commented. "The automobile was a very crude way of compassing my death."

"I am not so sure it was a crude way. To me it seems a very clever way, with a minimum of danger for the assassin. We hang murderers—but whoever heard of hanging a *careless* chauffeur. Moreover, his chances for escape at the time are infinitely greater—as witness this very case."

"Nevertheless, I maintain that it is a crude way and far inferior to Lotzen's methods—which hitherto have always been rather neat."

"Different countries require different methods! I think he has shown remarkable adaptability—he was in a strange land, without resources for crime, and yet he adopted the latest mode—and the best. He is decidedly *au fait* to the minute."

"Well, maybe you're right—I've always regarded Lotzen as an exquisite in crime and its methods. But what I can't understand is why—if Mademoiselle de Varenne's warning is part of their plot—she revealed the attempts on my life."

"To make for her honesty of intention," I said. "Besides, as they know very well, it didn't reveal anything of which we were not already aware."

There was a ring at my apartment. A moment later my man appeared with a package.

"For you, sir, from the Valerian Ambassador," he said, and went out.

It was long and circular, wrapped in heavy paper and tied with a gold cord.

"Looks like a bottle!" laughed Armand.

I cut the cord and the paper unrolled, disclosing a pasteboard case around a bottle, and the Ambassador's card with, "If you drink when you receive this, you will drink with me," written on it.

The bottle was old and cobwebby, and the label was dark and streaked with age.

"Looks as if it might be some of Von Empfield's best Burgundy, or perhaps Moselle," the King remarked. "You're high in favor with my Ambassador, old man."

"I am glad some one appreciates me," I commented, turning the bottle toward the light, the better to read the label . . . . "Whee! but I didn't imagine how much he loved me! No wonder he sent me only one bottle! Can you guess what this is? It is a bottle of 'Korona Tokaji, 1868.'"

"So the label says—but how about the cork?" asked Armand.

"The cork is genuine—it has not been drawn, I make it; though I'm not sufficiently acquainted

with the brand to know. I've had it twice before —do you remember where?" I asked.

Armand laughed softly in reminiscence.

"Shall I ever forget it!" said he—— "We three and three others, at the Inn of the Twisted Pines the afternoon of the day when Frederick tumbled Lotzen's plot upon him like a house of cards."

He put out his hand for the bottle, and walked to the window with it.

"It is genuine—or, if it is not, it will require a more expert eye than mine to detect it," he said. "The cork has not been touched since it was bottled. When you come to Valeria, my friends, you shall have as much Korona Tokaji as you can drink."

"Meanwhile, we'll drink this to start on," I answered, and rang for my man.

"Hobbs," said I, handing him the bottle, "draw the cork and get four wine glasses; and mind you, don't spill a drop."

"We will drink now as we drank that first time," said I: "'to the one we love the best'—our wives now, our sweethearts then."

"And I propose that afterward we drink another —if the wine hold out—to Lotzen's last try," Armand remarked.

"And his defeat—followed by acolytes and incense," I added.

"Have it any way you wish!" he remarked.

"Only so we get the drink and quickly. I'm perishing with thirst."

"Hobbs must be having trouble with the cork," Moore observed presently.

"He has been a rather long time," said the King.

I touched the bell.

Hobbs did not respond.

I touched it again—and longer.

Still no response.

One does not care to go in search of a servant, so I rang a third time—and without result.

The King laughed. "The two d's: drunk or decamped—and either is a misfortune. But if he *is* only drunk better look him up, Dick, before the entire bottle is consumed."

"It's very queer," said I, and went in search of him.

Next the library was my bed-room, then a bath, with a small room adjoining which was Hobbs's. I crossed the bed-room, and through the bath-room to Hobbs's room. The door was shut—or nearly so. I knocked; and, receiving no answer, I pushed it back. It held, as though something were against it. I pushed harder—and as I pushed the door slowly opened. I stepped within—and halted.

Hobbs was crumpled on the floor—an empty glass beside him, the bottle on the table a few feet away. Even as he lay, I could see that this was no drunken stupor. The man had been sorely stricken or was dead. It was his body that had blocked the door.

I stooped and put my hand on his face; then swiftly unbuttoned his coat and waistcoat and felt his heart. No answering throb met my pressure. It was still. Hobbs was dead!

I went quickly back to the library. The King, hearing my step in the bed-room, called out as I entered:

"Ho! for the water wag——"

Then I suppose he saw my face, for he stopped.

"What is it, Dick?" he cried, and both he and Moore leaned forward in their chairs.

"Hobbs is dead," I said.

"Dead!" they both echoed.

"Dead!" said I. "Come here!" and led them back to my servant's room. . . . .

"Was he lying here when you entered?" the King asked, when he and Moore had assured themselves that life was extinct.

"He had fallen against the door," I answered. "I had to push back the body to open it."

The shade was half-drawn. Moore moved over and shot it up—and our eyes travelled from the dead body to the opened bottle on the table, and down to the glass on the floor.

The King was nearest and he stepped across and picked it up. It was a heavy glass (not a wine glass) from off the wash-stand and the fall had not broken it. He glanced at it an instant, raised it to his nose, then handed it to me.

"Wine!" he said simply.

I lifted the bottle and held it against the light—about a gill of the contents was missing.

"Tokay!" I answered.

Then we three looked at one another.

"By Heaven! it was poisoned!" exclaimed Moore.

The King and I nodded.

"Yes!" said I.

"A close call for us," said the King. "Hobbs, you deserve knighthood—though you may not merit it. Has he a family?"

"Not to my knowledge."

I replaced the glass on the floor beside the corpse, took up the bottle, and we went back to the library. Then I turned to the King.

"We shall have to summon a physician at once," I said. "Hobbs committed suicide—unless you wish the real facts to be known."

"I most assuredly do not wish the real facts known, if you can arrange it without any resulting trouble," he replied; "we don't want to be involved in a murder mystery. Hobbs is dead, but you may trust me to exact adequate punishment when the opportunity comes."

I nodded, and went to the telephone. I called, first, Dr. Northam and asked him to come around instantly; then an undertaking establishment, to take charge of the body, and lastly I told the hotel office to send the manager to me at once.

The latter came first, of course. I told him, simply, that I had found my servant dead in his

room, and asked him to wait the coming of the physician whom I had summoned. He naturally was for suppressing the facts, and keeping them from the newspapers, so he gladly acquiesced.

A moment later, Dr. Northam arrived. He was one of the fashionable practitioners of the city—a tall, slender man of middle age, the physician for most of the diplomatic corps—and entirely discreet.

"Dr. Northam," I said, when the rest had been presented, "I sent for you to look at my man, Hobbs, who has died either from heart failure or suicide. He failed to respond to my summons, though I rang thrice. I went in search of him; and found his body on the floor of his room—where I have left it for you to see, after satisfying myself, of course, that he was really dead."

We went into Hobbs's room. The doctor dropped on his knees beside the body, and made a brief examination. Then he arose.

"Heart failure or suicide," he said. "The glass, there, is suspicious of the latter. When did you last see him?"

"About ten or fifteen minutes before I found him," I replied.

He picked up the glass and smelled it.

"Liquor of some sort," said he. Then he looked at me. "The death has all the appearance of heart failure, Mr. Courtney, and I will give a certificate to that effect if you wish it. Of course, if you are not satisfied, and insist upon an autopsy

and a chemical analysis of the stomach, you can notify the coroner."

"Since the man is dead, either by his own hand or from natural causes, I do not see what good an autopsy will subserve," said I.

"No good in the least," he answered, "except to give the case notoriety in the newspapers."

He filled out the death certificate as from "angina pectoris," and departed. Just as he was leaving, the undertaker arrived. I gave him the certificate, and told him to take the body and prepare it for burial. Then I went back to my friends.

The King was sitting on the table, slowly swinging one foot and stabbing at the pad with a letter-opener. Moore was looking out the window at the cabs and motors and the crowd of people thronging the thoroughfare below.

"Well," said I, "what is your theory, Major?"

"You are better on theories than I am, Dick," said the King. "Let me hear yours first."

"I could almost believe Lotzen himself directed it—it is his way of doing things," I answered.

"Maybe he did direct it," Moore observed.

"Why not? The girl likely lied," the King remarked.

"Maybe the girl told the truth, too," Moore continued. "Maybe Lotzen arranged the thing before he left."

"They were too long about putting it into execution," Armand objected.

I saw Moore's point.

"I believe the General is right," I said. "Lotzen arranged it before he left, to be used only in the last extremity—for, you must remember, we do not know how many schemes on your Majesty's life have been abortive or have gone astray. Bigler knew, at least he suspected, that you would come direct to me here from your interview with Mademoiselle de Varenne. He saw you leave the Café Republique, he followed you to this hotel—and then he sent the wine with Von Empfield's card inclosed. And see how cleverly he worded it to insure its instant use: 'If you drink when you receive this, you will drink with me.' He knew that I would not suspect—knew that I would drink in response to the invitation—knew that you would be here—knew that you would drink with me. And, then—do you appreciate just what a trifling chance prevented the success of their devilish plot! A thirsty valet—that was all!"

"Destiny!" said the King. "My star, Dick, my star."

"Your star will never have a narrower escape from falling into the sun," said I. "Destiny almost forgot."

"Destiny never forgets her own!" the King laughed

"If her own use proper precaution," I supplemented.

"All the foregoing is based on the assumption that the wine was poisoned," Moore remarked. "I

thought you both said that the cork had not been tampered with."

"It had not been—I am sure of it," asserted the King, and I supported him.

"Let me look at the bottle," said Moore.

I got it from the cupboard in the bed-room where I had hidden it, and the cork with the corkscrew still in it, and handed them to him.

He examined the cork curiously; then stuck the cork in the bottle and held it bottom up.

"I thought as much!" he said, after a moment's inspection. "You're right—the cork was not tampered with—but the bottom was. They have drilled a tiny hole through the glass and injected the poison, then plugged the opening with some substance that is the color of the bottle. It is an old trick, but rather a neat one under the circumstances."

"It is the Devil's trick!" I exclaimed. "The Devil's trick!"

"And Lotzen almost turned it!" the King observed. "Companionship with me appears to be a trifle hazardous—you would better take warning, Dick."

I shrugged the suggestion aside.

"What are we to do with this wine?" I asked. "For my part, I do not think it wise to risk suspicion by having it analyzed. Hobbs's death might be connected with it. And yet, if it is not analyzed, we can never know positively that it is poisoned."

"We know it to *our* satisfaction, which is sufficient!" laughed Moore.

"Shall I empty it?" I asked the King.

"If you have a small bottle, Dick," he answered, "I'll fill it with the wine and have it analyzed when I get home. I have a notion I should like to know what poison Lotzen uses. Hydrocyanic acid is the only drug I know that could be so instantly fatal—the position of the body and glass showed how quickly it acted—but this has not the characteristic odor of bitter almonds." He turned to Moore. "General, how would you like to be the King's taster? The office has lapsed for some thousand years, but I may have to revive it."

"I have not sufficient discrimination of palate. Better give it to Bernheim!" suggested Moore.

"And die of starvation? No! no! my friend, no! no!" the King laughed. "I'll risk Lotzen's poisons, before I'll have Bernheim for my taster."

I went out and gave some further instructions to the undertaker, who was just departing with the body. Then I filled a small bottle with the wine, poured the rest in the bowl in the bath-room, and gave the phial to the King.

"Look out for it," I cautioned. "We don't know what is in it, so best be very careful—queer chemical reactions occur hours after the compounding, remember."

"I reckon no chemical reaction can occur which will cause me to drink the stuff, so I'll risk it," said the King.

After he and Moore were gone, I sat down and, lighting a cigar, fell to thinking. Hobbs, poor fellow, was dead!—a victim, here in peaceful America, of a quarrel on the other side of the world—and of which he was as ignorant as the babe unborn. What agony he suffered, what tortures he endured, during the few moments that elapsed between the drinking and his death, I can never know. Since it had to be, I hope it came like the lightning's flash. It was his destiny, as the King would say, so why question it? But he was a faithful servant; like all English servants, however, who are well trained, more of an automaton than a human being; and one treated him rather as a machine than a thing of flesh and blood. So that, however much I might regret his untoward ending, I could not grow sentimental over it. Moreover, if he had not tasted my wine he would not have died. But, there again, I forgave him. If he had not tasted it, the King and Moore and I would have drunk it—and died. On the whole, he deserved the best that I could do for him now—an expensive funeral and flowers, and the memory that he had in fact, however unwittingly, saved the King's life, as well as Moore's and my own. Well! he should have his funeral, and his flowers, and his memory.

I was aroused by a knock on the door, and such is the force of habit that, for an instant, I waited for Hobbs to answer it. Then I sprang up and answered it myself.

Count Bigler stood bowing on the threshold.

VIII

A MESSAGE FROM THE DUKE

I SUPPOSE I betrayed by my manner some of the astonishment I felt, for he smiled deprecatingly and bowed again.

"You are surprised, monsieur," he said. "I have taken you a bit suddenly, doubtless—I should have sent up my card from the office. I pray your pardon."

"It would have been more according to usage," I answered, as I stood aside for him to enter.

"But you might not have been in!" he smiled.

"I might not," said I, "and then again, I might. Will you be seated, Count?"

"Thank you!" he replied, and sat down beside the table. "It would depend upon what you thought was my errand, whether you would be at home—*n'est ce pas?*"

"And also whether I wanted to be amused," I added—"though, frankly, your errand is what particularly concerns me."

He smiled vaguely. "May I smoke?" he asked.

"You may," said I, indicating the table whereon were both cigars and cigarettes. "Help yourself."

"Your pardon, sir," he answered, drawing out his own cigarette case; "I never smoke any but my own special blend."

"From preference or from precaution?" I asked.

"From both!" he laughed.

"But more especially from precaution."

"You, too, have had experience—of a bad cigar or cigarette, monsieur?"

"For instance," I went on, "for all you know, Count, these may be doped, or even—poisoned."

He opened his eyes in surprise, then slowly let the lids sink back into their wonted place.

"Not *yours*, Mr. Courtney—another's might, but not yours," he answered.

I waived my hand disparagingly. "Just as we can never tell whether the food we eat or the wine we drink has been tampered with."

A bit of a smile lingered in his eyes and hovered round the corners of his mouth.

"I should not doubt *your* food or drink, Mr. Courtney," he said.

"It is all a lottery, my dear Count, all a lottery! We can only exercise care, and trust to Providence, or destiny, or whatever you please to call it. We cannot even trust our friends' cards—they may be false. Only to-day, I received a package, ostensibly from a friend—his card was in it, accompanying a bottle of wine of a most excellent vintage. On the card was written, ostensibly by him, mind you, a request to drink when I received it and I would drink with him. Some friends were with me—the bottle had been uncorked—we were just about to drink when——"

I leaned back and lighted a cigarette, and blew a cloud of smoke ceilingward, never for an instant, however, taking my eyes from Bigler's face.

He was leaning a bit forward, as if in interest, but the smile still lingered in his eyes, though banished from his mouth.

"When—what?" he said. "Get on, sir, get on! You Americans are so deliberate, Mr. Courtney."

"When it was discovered, quite by accident," said I slowly, "that the bottle had been tampered with, and the wine, being thus under a suspicion, was not drunk. Instead, we tested it, and found——"

Again I blew a smoke ring upward, and looked at him.

"Found? Found what, Mr. Courtney?" he demanded, seemingly with breathless interest, which may or may not have been assumed.

"That it had been poisoned," said I curtly.

"Horrible! Horrible!" he exclaimed. "I cannot understand your America, Mr. Courtney! You will try to discover the criminal?"

"No!" said I. "No—it is not necessary. The criminal is already discovered."

I had thought to disconcert him but I failed.

"You will punish him, surely! You will not let him escape!" he cried.

"Again, no!—it is not a crime in America to poison one by wine," I replied, blandly—"though it is not considered particularly good form."

An amused look passed over his face.

"A strange custom, sir," he said.

"Which reminds me, Count," I went on, "that I was so much upset by the poison matter, I neglected to offer you anything to drink. I beg your pardon!"

"I don't wish anything, Mr. Courtney," he declared hastily.

"Nonsense, Count; it is never too late for a drink. Excuse me a moment," and I went into my bed-room. I would give him a chance to show his nerve.

I filled two wine glasses with claret, which was sufficiently close in color to the Tokay to serve the purpose, and returned to the room.

"No! Count, it is never too late for a drink," I repeated; "and here is some marvellous wine, fit for the King's own table—Korona Tokaji, 1868."

If I had any doubt that he was an accessory to the crime (which, however, I was sure that Lotzen planned), it was dispelled that instant. He had not the marvellous control of his features in which the Duke excelled, and though he tried hard to steady himself, so as not to betray his guilt in his face, yet it was useless. I read confession in his eyes and mouth and even in his hands.

I put down the tray, and picking up the glasses offered one to him—the other I took myself.

"Let us drink to his Majesty the King of Valeria," I said.

I knew the uncertainty that was in his mind—

the uncertainty whether the wine I offered him was the poisoned Tokay. Lotzen would have drunk, with a laugh and with confidence—he would have known that he was in no danger, because, out of respect to myself alone if not from fear of the law, I would not give him poisoned wine. But Bigler had not the Duke's quick mind and assurance to act instantly, and after the briefest hesitation, which convicted him absolutely, he declined the glass.

"I regret, Mr. Courtney," he said with a low bow, "that I am, as you Americans say, 'on the water-wagon'—you will excuse me, I am sure."

"Of course I'll excuse you, Count. The 'water-wagon' is always a sufficient plea," I replied. "For myself, however, it seems a shame to waste good liquor, so, with your permission——"

With a bow, I lifted the glass which I had proffered *him* and drained it. Then I laughed.

"A suspicious person might have thought, my dear Count," said I, "that you were afraid to drink, lest by mistake I had given you of the poisoned Tokay."

"My dear Mr. Courtney," he replied, "I am confident that you never make mistakes."

Which, on the whole, was not bad for an answer, and showed, at least, that he had recovered himself.

With that, having made my point, I changed the conversation.

"I believe," said I, "that you had something to say to me—or am I mistaken?"

"As I have just remarked, monsieur never makes

mistakes," he smiled. "I *have* something to say to you, if I may be permitted."

"Say on, Count," I answered, going over to the mantel and leaning on it. "Say on—I'm all attention."

He took out his case, and selected another cigarette with much deliberation.

"Mr. Courtney," he began, "I come from his Royal Highness the Duke of Lotzen."

"I am honored!" said I, with a bow.

He bowed back. "His Royal Highness considers that you have great influence with the present King of Valeria, and he desires to send to him, through you, this message."

"One moment, sir," I interrupted. "I may be on terms of intimacy with his Majesty, but I fail to comprehend why a message should be delivered to me here, when the King is in his capital, more than three thousand miles away."

"I have expressed myself rather awkwardly, I fear," he apologized. "What I should have said, is that the Duke desires to send, through you, to the Mr. Smith with whom you were dining the other evening, a message for the present King of Valeria."

"I can deliver the message," I said, "but, of course, I cannot answer for its being brought to his Majesty's attention."

"Let us leave off the latter portion then—it is mere surplusage—and simply put it that the Duke desires you to deliver a message from him to—Mr. Smith."

"That is a very simple matter," said I—"though, I must confess, I am at a loss to understand why you should entrust this message to me, when you could deliver it in person to Mr. Smith."

"It is in the interests of—Mr. Smith."

"Yes?" I interrogated.

"Your influence with him is very powerful."

"With Mr. Smith?" I asked.

The Count bowed. "And also with the King."

"Then if I apprehend correctly, you count on my influence as well with Mr. Smith to persuade him to delivery of the message, as with the King to grant it?"

"Precisely that!" said he.

"Which puts quite another face on the matter," said I. "I shall have to hear your message, or rather the Duke of Lotzen's message, before I can say whether or not I will deliver it."

"As you wish, monsieur," said he. "This is the message: The Duke of Lotzen desires that you will convey to Mr. Smith, and through him to the King of Valeria, his intention to pass the summer in Valeria—either at the Ferida Palace in Dornlitz, or at his Castle of Lotzen, as to his Highness may seem fit."

"I can see no objection to delivering the message to Mr. Smith," I said. "Whether it ever reaches his Majesty, or what his decision on the request will be, I cannot presume to guess."

"There is something more to the message," he continued. "If the King attempts to banish the

Duke, or to molest him in any way whatever, the Duke will disclose to the Council and to the House of Nobles certain matters which have lately come to his notice, and which will seriously embarrass both the American and the Queen."

"If I may be permitted," said I, "the Duke's threat is absurdly vague—almost laughable, indeed—and, in the light of the past, strangely at variance with what might be expected from him."

"*In the light of the past*," he replied meaningly, "it should receive his Majesty's most serious consideration. His Highness is not wont to make an idle boast."

"His Highness's boasts have all been idle; though, at least, they had the merit hitherto of being reasonably specific."

"Possibly that may be why he changed," the Count replied. "At all events, the matter is not for me to debate. I am conveying the Duke's message, nothing more."

"It is a pity—since, I believe, you asked me to persuade Mr. Smith to convey your message to the King—that the Duke did not deliver his message in person to Mr. Smith. He could have saved time as well as have been more direct."

The Count smiled blandly. "I have given you the message, Mr. Courtney, you can use your own judgment as to delivering it. Since it is solely in the interest of the King, the Duke, I am directed to say, will assume that it has been delivered to

him promptly, and will act on that assumption."

"On behalf of the King, I venture to thank His Highness for his interest!" I smiled.

"You misunderstand," said Bigler. "The Duke has no interest in the present King of Valeria. He simply warns his Majesty what will happen if he is molested." Then he bowed. "And now, sir, having delivered the message, I will, if you have nothing to add to what you have already said, make my adieu."

I returned his bow.

"I trust we understand each other," I replied.

He backed toward the door.

"A moment! Count!" I exclaimed. "Will you not have some wine?"—and I lifted the remaining glass from the tray.

"Monsieur forgets, I am——"

"You are on the 'water-wagon'—true, I did forget!"

And looking him in the eyes I drained the glass.

Then the door closed behind him.

IX

THE KING'S ULSTER

When I told the King of the message the following morning he was grimly amused.

"It is Hugo's marriage," he remarked.

But when I related the incident of the wine, he laughed gayly.

"The one is a fit complement to the other!" he said. "I would I could have seen him when you put him to the test. He was afraid to risk it. Lotzen, however, would have called your bluff."

"I shouldn't have tried the bluff," said I. "I know it would have been futile."

He nodded, and for a while he sat thinking.

"There can be but one reason for his desire not to be molested while in Valeria: he is plotting for the throne," said I presently.

"Yes," he agreed; "he wishes to be on the spot rather than at a distance—to direct it himself and not to trust to a subordinate. I might even go further and say that he contemplates a plot with himself as the chief actor. A quiet plot that will be shared by few, and may be worked out without anyone being the wiser but those few. A plot such as we met and defeated when Dehra found the false Book of Laws in his castle and rescued the true

Book from the flames in the King's library—while Lotzen and I fought each other."

"But not to the death!" I interjected. "You had him at your mercy and you let him go."

"Yes, I let him go—because I dared not take the life of my rival for the Crown. It was policy, not pity, that controlled me."

"It is different now," said I. "The Crown is settled—the decree is known. Lotzen is no longer your rival. He is only a conspirator. Policy need not control."

"I was thinking that, Dick," said he, with a laugh. "And I am minded to let him play his game out to the end and take the consequences. Then we shall have peace from his plottings."

"You mean you will let him remain in Valeria?"

He nodded. "I shall let him remain for his own undoing. He has forced the issue; now he must pay the penalty."

"He is a good gambler," said I. "He will pay stakes, if he must."

"Yes—and pay them with a smiling face and a steady eye. Do you remember what he said in the Vierle garden—when I had sent his sword flying and he stood helpless before me, while you were restraining the women from interfering in his behalf?—'Strike, man, or the petticoats will steal me from you.'"

"Shall I ever forget it!" I exclaimed. "Shall I ever forget anything of that evening! The huge

garden—the Masques—the Black Twins and the White—the attempt to assassinate you—Lotzen's and Spencer's approach—your going to meet them—his insults—the duel—Moore's *coup*, and the Duke's sword a-flying. I can see it all again. It was more like some wonderful stage picture than an actuality."

"It has always seemed unreal to me, Dick—like a dream that is startlingly vivid and lasting."

"It is lasting!" I laughed. "Lotzen has never forgotten it."

"Yet he fought me again in the King's library."

"Because he had to fight—he was caught like a rat in a trap."

"I don't think so," said the King. "He fought me solely to prevent me from saving the Book of Laws, which he had thrown into the grate-fire."

"But you saved it."

"Dehra saved it; I did not. I had quite enough to save myself."

"Have you kept your hand in with the foils?" I asked.

"I have fenced with Moore almost every day—but I'm not as young as I was five years ago, Dick."

"Neither is Lotzen," said I. "Moreover, you have a clean life behind you, which he hasn't."

"Well, we shall see," the King replied. "Twice I have been merciful—the third time, I may not have the opportunity to be merciful, but if I should have, my mercy may be short."

He studied the coal of his cigarette. I was silent.

"I wonder where Bigler is," he said suddenly.

"Gone," said I. "He and his companion left last night for New York. On inquiry, I find that two days ago he purchased their passage for Cherbourg."

"For when?"

"To-day."

"Now I reckon you will rest easier!" he laughed.

"I will, when I am sure that he has sailed—and left no confederate behind him."

"Where is Marmont?" he asked presently.

"In New York."

The King smiled. "Miss De Marcellin is there too, I believe."

"Just so!" said I. "That is why Marmont is there."

"It's a merry game," he reflected.

"A merry game," I agreed—"so long as it is a game."

"And when it's not a game?" he questioned.

"It's reputed to be hell—though I've never been through it."

He agreed with a nod. "We were lucky, Dick."

"Lucky is too mild—blessed is better."

"There are not many Helens or Dehras these days."

"There are not," said I. "There are not, and never will be."

"We are becoming sentimental over our own wives, Dick!" he laughed.

"Didn't I once say to you that there was no fool like an old fool?" I asked.

"You did. And I answered you: 'Unless it be one who is just old enough to be neither old nor young.'"

"I remember it perfectly," said I. "It was in Pittsburgh, the evening we made the wager that you are to pay on Tuesday night."

"Much has happened to us since then," he reflected.

"But more of the much to you, your Majesty!" I replied.

"You have arranged for the dinner?" he asked.

"Everything—at the Club, at eight o'clock."

"Remember—you have *carte blanche*."

"*You* are likely to remember it, when you see the size of your check!" I laughed.

"Are many of our Pittsburgh intimates coming?"

"All of them—except Denniston, who is dead, and McKennon, who is in Japan. Do you want to know who will be here?"

"No—I'm not curious. I can wait. And, Dick, I reckon you might lift the incog for that evening. Tell them beforehand who I am, and then let them forget it. I want to be Major, and not your Majesty; and I want them to get over their surprise before I come in—you understand?"

And he had it as he wished. His old friends slapped him on the back and called him "Major"

or "Dalberg"; those who did not know him well enough for that, addressed him in the more formal style of both the title and the name. And it was a particularly good dinner, and a successful dinner as well—the most successful dinner I have ever been to, if lightheartedness, and congeniality, and "go" are to be considered.

Of the Pittsburgh crowd who had been Armand's intimates, there were Marmont—who had forsaken the field of campaign in New York long enough to run over—Westlake, Hastings, Macloud, Croyden, Leicester, Harwood. The others were Cosgrove, who had been the First Secretary, and Pryor, the Naval Attaché, when Armand had been the Military Attaché with me at Dornlitz. So much was for old times. Then there were Pendleton, the Secretary of State; Sevier, the Attorney General (they were invited not because of the distinguished positions they occupied, but because they were all around good fellows); Von Empfield, the Valerian Ambassador; and Tracy, Warren, Stocton, Thayer and Coates. These, with the King, Moore, and myself made the twenty. And when the champagne came on, I rapped on the table to draw their attention, and stood up, glass in hand.

"My friends!" I said, "this is not *my* dinner. Five years ago, in the Pittsburgh Club, I made a wager with Major Dalberg that thirty days thereafter he and I would be in Valeria, and he would have dined with the King and danced with the Prin-

cess Royal. Major Dalberg lost—and great events happened in consequence, as you well know. Tonight, he pays his bet."

I raised my glass, and all arose and raised theirs.

"I give you, gentlemen: Their Majesties the King and Queen of Valeria."

"Their Majesties!" we shouted, and drank the toast—all save Armand. "Her Majesty!" had been his reply.

And when we had drunk, I waived my glass again.

"To Major Dalberg—the American gentleman and soldier!" I said.

And we drank that also, with a shout and a cheer.

The following day the four of us went to New York, picked up the De Marcellins and an enormous amount of luggage, and sailed the next morning for Valeria. As we left our moorings and glided down the harbor, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Moore, who was standing beside me, smiled.

"We're off!" he said. "We're off, at last—and I'm glad of it. If we are to give Lotzen another chance, I much prefer it should be at home, where we know his methods and can meet them. This thing of automobiles that run amuck, and wine that is poisoned, and marriage registers that are stolen, is a trifle disconcerting. It got on my nerves at last, I confess. I like to hit back, and to have something to hit at."

"It got on mine from the first," I answered. "But it never seemed to affect the King."

"The King hasn't any nerves. He is a marvel, Courtney! He doesn't seem to know there is such a thing as danger—and yet, withal, he has the tenderest heart of any man I know."

"He tells me that he has fenced with you regularly during the last five years," said I. "Is he as expert with the sword as he used to be?"

"Even more so, I think. It is touch and go between us now—and time was when I was easily his master."

"How about Lotzen, I wonder."

"I don't know," he said. "If he hasn't kept his hand in, he is practically ruined. But, if he has, there is no telling—the best *maîtres* in the world are, you know, in Paris."

"Could he have improved sufficiently to kill the King?" I asked.

"You mean in a duel? No! certainly not—unless he has stumbled on or developed some secret *coup*, like the one he used at the Vierle Masque. But secret *coups* are as rare as a born swordsman; moreover, they are not developed in the schools." Then he smiled. "You do not anticipate a third encounter between the King and the Duke?" he queried.

"*Quién sabe?*" I answered. "*Quién sabe?* They have fought *à outrance* twice; why not a third time—and the last?"

"But will it be the last?" said he. "Will the King kill him, even then? Twice he has held him at his mercy, each time by every law of justification he could have made an end, and yet he did not."

"The third time he will make an end of him," said I. "He has done with mercy."

"I am glad," said he, "otherwise I should strive to prevent them meeting. Heretofore, the King has had all the risk and Lotzen none."

"You are sure, then, that the King can kill him?" I asked again.

"As sure as that the sun is shining,—or," as Miss De Marcellin and Marmont passed, "that his Majesty's cousin is an extraordinarily beautiful girl."

"If it is so sure as all that, I am content," laughed I.

"But Lotzen will not fight the King unless pride or necessity oblige," Moore cautioned. "He knows his master, never fear."

"Hate, sometimes, will move men to do strange things," I remarked.

"Hate never ruled with Lotzen. He is too steady-headed. He is not one to chance all on a single throw, when the odds are heavy against him."

"What are you two talking about?" said the King, as he joined us after accompanying Mrs. De Marcellin to her suite.

Mrs. De Marcellin, it appeared, retired to her cabin as soon as the steamer sailed, and did not reappear until it docked.

All of which, I dare say, was to Marmont's liking, since Miss De Marcellin was a good sailor, and never missed a meal nor was an hour off deck—and no more did he. But again, I anticipate.

The third day out, we ran into a fog, which turned to rain as the day wore on—with the weather chilly and the wind somewhat high and gusty. As a result, everyone was driven inside and the decks were practically deserted of passengers.

Be easy! I am not going to describe the life on a steamer, at such times. Those who have crossed will know precisely what it was like far better than I can tell them, and those who have not crossed can imagine it quite as well from what I have said as from pages of description. I am recording an account of the Dalbergs and of Lotzen's last try, not writing a sea yarn.

It was about ten o'clock that night, and the King and I were gossiping in our parlor, on the promenade deck, when Moore joined us. Armand had taken the Imperial suite and had insisted that I should occupy it with him. The De Marcellins had the suite opposite; Moore and Marmont rooms near by.

"Where is Marmont?" the King inquired.

"Why do you ask?" said I. "With Miss De Marcellin, of course."

"She and Marmont are playing auction with Miss Stuyvesant and Mr. Forester in the lounge," said Moore.

"That is harmless," the King commented.

"It depends on the size of the stakes—also, how often she looks at him, and how," said I.

"Judging from observation," Moore appended, "she is fully aware of the power of the 'how often' and the 'how.'"

"And Marmont is greedy for more, I reckon!" laughed the King. "Love is a curious thing in men, I have observed—a very curious thing! The longer it is in coming the quicker it comes, and the more violent it is. I dare say, you both will agree with me—from personal experience?"

Whereat both Moore and I smiled, a bit consciously perhaps, and admitted the truth of his words—remembering our own impetuous courtships, as well as the King's.

"I am going for a turn on the awning deck before I turn in—come along?" I asked.

"Not I," said the King, yawning. "It's too dirty a night. I think I shall to bed."

"I'll go you," volunteered Moore; "wait till I get an ulster——"

"Take mine," said the King. "There it is. We are of a size, you know—the Black Twins of the Vierle Masque."

And getting up, he forced him to accept it.

I got my own, and we climbed up to the topmost deck.

"B-r-w-w!" Moore exclaimed, as the wind dashed the rain in our faces and whipped it about us. "The King was right—it is a dirty night."

"The air feels good, however," I returned, and we began our walk, choosing the port side, where the elements did not beat so fiercely.

To the fore went the search-lights, like feeling fingers through the mist of blackness—to the rear and on the sides, darkness impenetrable, unfathomable.

We had the deck to ourselves except for one man who presently, wrapped in a long top-coat with collar turned up and cap drawn down over his eyes, passed and repassed. Beyond the first cursory glance, I did not observe him, save when his figure loomed up before us, for an instant, as he went by.

"Well!" said I finally, "have you had enough?"

"One more turn and then I'm ready to go in," Moore answered.

So we faced about and tramped forward—overtaking, midway, the other passenger who sought air, or solitude, or a dirty night to commune with himself.

Just as we had passed him—Moore being nearest—some premonition caused me to turn my head, and glance back. As I did so, the fellow leaped forward, arm upraised to strike—and the light from an officer's cabin nearby flashed on steel.

My warning cry would have come too late, Moore would have gone down with a dagger in his back, had not the ship, at that instant, given a lurch—not much of a lurch, but enough to disconcert the assassin's aim. Instead of the back, his blade passed through Moore's side. At the same moment,

I sprang at the fellow and fetched him a blow on the head with all my force. I struck wildly, not aiming at any point in particular, but by good fortune or ill-fortune—depending on how one looks at it—it landed behind the ear. The rogue's own impetus, coupled with the impetus I gave him, sent him plunging to the deck right at the rail, and before I could raise a hand to save him—even if I were so minded—he had rolled under it and shot down into the sea.

For an instant I was horror-stricken: I had been the cause of his death. The next instant I thought of Moore and turned, expecting to see him lying on the deck. Instead, he was standing where I had seen him last, looking at me with a smile.

"The prettiest right-hander I have seen in years," he said.

"You're not stabbed?" I exclaimed.

"No!—the fellow missed me by a hair. He cut the King's ulster, and my coat, but he didn't get me. This comes of wearing another man's clothes, Courtney."

"By Heaven! he thought you were the King!" I cried.

"Sure he did! Well, he won't have a second thought on the matter—you settled him." He stopped and picked up the dagger. "I shall keep this as a memento of how, by accident, I saved his Majesty's life—and of your timely blow."

"Be careful," I cautioned—"the blade may be poisoned."

"A Lotzen trick!" he commented. "Poisoned wine and poisoned blades—the next, I reckon, will be the food."

"I wonder if Bigler isn't on this ship," I said.

"You mean that he was the fellow who——"

"No!—the fellow who struck you was too small for Bigler; moreover, I saw his face as I hit him; there was no resemblance."

In the inner passage-way we encountered the King. He had on Moore's ulster.

"I was just going out to join you," he remarked.

"Come into the cabin a moment," said I.

Without a word, he turned back. I closed the door, and drew the shades. Then I pointed to the dagger, and to the rent in the ulster.

"Do you understand?" I asked. "It is *your* ulster?"

The King looked from one to the other, and then up at Moore.

"You're not hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No!—thanks to a lurch of the vessel, and to Courtney's blow," Moore replied.

"And the fellow?"

"Overboard." He held the dagger up to the light. "You're right, Courtney!" he said, pointing to a dark stain around the point.

Wetting his handkerchief, he wiped the blade. The stain came away. The steel was clean.

"Are you quite sure it didn't even scratch you?" the King insisted.

"Perfectly sure; my coat is cut, but not my waistcoat."

"It was a close call," was the reply. "You have added one more to the debts I already owe you, Ralph," and he put out his hand and shook Moore's hard.

"I deserve no credit, sire," replied the embarrassed Irishman. "It was unintentional, I assure you."

Whereat we all three laughed, and Moore's embarrassment was relieved. It is strange how a brave man hates to show his feelings before another.

"You are certain the rogue was lost overboard?" the King asked, when I had related briefly the episode on the deck.

"There can be no doubt of it," I answered. "We both saw him roll out and disappear."

He laughed lightly. "My cousin is a bit unlucky—four tries on my life in two weeks, and every one a failure. Which only goes to show, my friends, that what you would have well done you must do yourself."

"Which applies especially to preserving one's own life," said I pointedly.

Whereat we all laughed again.

"I promise to let Moore wear my ulster all the time we are on ship-board," the King volunteered. "And I'll stand for a new suit, too, General, to replace the one that was punctured."

And that was ever the King's way—light-hearted

and jesting wherever he was concerned—trusting in his destiny; and with some cause, I was beginning to admit—else why had he escaped these many attacks, and without a single scratch?

"To-morrow," he said, "I shall make myself known to the Captain, and we'll try to find out whether Bigler is aboard, and also Lotzen. A ship is too cramped a place for this sort of game, and I am not minded to let them play it here. You settled the one, Courtney, and I'm glad of it. If he have a confederate on board, I hope it will teach him a lesson."

"I felicitate you, sire," I said. "You are not wholly wanting in discretion."

But he only laughed afresh, and changed the subject.

X

HER ROYAL HIGHNESS

THE King interviewed the Captain the following morning, disclosing his own identity and his desire to know whether Lotzen or Bigler were aboard, but revealing nothing of the episode of the previous evening.

The Captain, with all the deference which an Englishman has for a king, hastened to comply. At the end of an hour, he came and reported that after a thorough investigation by the stewards, no one corresponding with either of the persons designated by his Majesty was on board. The King thanked and dismissed him.

"He may be accurate and he may not," he said. "At least, if they are on the ship we know that it is in disguise. For my part, I am ready to believe that they are not aboard—that they hired your friend to do the job alone. There are plenty of thugs around New York only too ready to murder for money—and not much money at that."

"I should suggest the propriety of not exposing yourself at undue hours, or in unfrequented places on the ship," said I. "Lotzen could have hired two or three thugs, you know."

"And I can't trust to your knocking every one

of them into the sea!" laughed the King. "Well, I'll promise to be properly circumspect."

"Your Majesty is improving."

"Properly circumspect—until we land."

"Your friends will be satisfied even with small beginnings," I returned.

Whether it was because he was "properly circumspect," or because there were no more thugs aboard, or whatever was the reason, we docked at Liverpool without further incident—except to Miss De Marcellin and Marmont.

They had many incidents and episodes whereby the latter was given an opportunity to show his devotion, but was cleverly kept from an actual avowal. How she managed it is her secret—a secret which she shares with most clever women, but which is not known to us men. At least, we thought so—the King, Moore and I. And we had every reason for our opinion—though, occasionally, the man appears to be much more in earnest than he really is, and plays the game for his own amusement as well as the woman's. Certainly, both Miss De Marcellin and Marmont were enjoying the trip—and each other.

"Tell me!" said he, as on our last night out he and Miss De Marcellin were pacing the deck together. "What are you going for—what do you expect in Valeria?"

"I expect to see the wonderful Dehra," she replied, "and the Court balls, and the famous Count

Epping, and the ceremonies, and the nobility—both male and female——"

"Especially the male!" he interrupted.

"Especially the male," she agreed. "What do you expect to see, Mr. Marmont?"

"I expect to see the same."

"Especially the female?" she laughed.

"Especially the female," he replied significantly.

"How congenial we are," said she; "we can do everything together, except the nobility."

"We can do them together, also," he replied.

"That wouldn't be fair to the nobility, would it?"

"Is that a necessary essential?"

"Not necessary, but, let us say—advisable. I anticipate a very pleasant time with the nobility."

"I suppose you do—every man of them who is unincumbered will be trying to marry you, inside of four days."

"They won't succeed!" she said emphatically.

"You mean that?" he demanded.

"Of course, I do. I'm not going to marry any man inside of four days."

He laughed. "My English was awkward—the restriction qualified 'trying' and not 'marry.'"

"That is quite another question and I can't answer it."

"Why?"

"Because I've not yet met the conditions."

"Which are?" he persisted.

"His rank—his habits—his morals—his appearance—and whether I love him."

"Will not the first lead to the last?"

"Possibly."

"And isn't it at all necessary for him to love *you?*" he asked.

"Possibly!" smiling.

"But it is not sufficiently important to cause you to enumerate it?"

"Possibly!" still smiling.

"Possibly what? It is or it isn't?" he demanded.

"It isn't."

"I'll not believe it!" he declared.

"Then don't!" she laughed.

"You mean?"

"What I said."

"But *how* did you mean it?"

"Then don't!" she repeated.

"Don't what?"

"Don't believe it,—or take your choice; believe it or not, as you wish."

"In other words, it is immaterial to you what I believe."

"I didn't say so," she replied, with an upward glance through her long lashes.

"You implied it," he replied.

"No—you inferred it, Mr. Marmont."

"Wasn't I justified in inferring it?"

"That is the question—you think you were?"

"Certainly!"

"And I never contradict a man's inferences. A woman doesn't infer. She simply arrives. It isn't a train of thought with her, it's an—explosion."

"I see," said he. "Well, I'll not infer. I'll just suspend judgment, be in a state of equipoise, so to speak, on that particular matter. But what do you say as to the three remaining conditions—his habits, his morals, and his appearance?"

"Well, assuming his rank and his love——"

"You are assuming a great deal in the latter," he interjected.

"Thank you!"

"I meant nothing personal. You're beautiful as an angel, I know, but we are considering this as an abstract question—so we would better drop love out."

"Oh! we would better drop love out!" she repeated, with another upward glance.

"Yes! we better drop love out—until the American enters. Then we will start with love. It takes the place of rank."

"Until the American enters?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"Is there an American at the Valerian Court?" she asked.

"I hope not—yet."

She laughed softly. "So do I. He may distract me from the nobility."

"Which would be most unfortunate—for the nobility."

"And for me, also," she amended.

"In that view of it, it is well that all Americans should be warned away—moreover, they have neither rank nor a damaged reputation, not to speak of decayed morals, to recommend them."

"Will you warn them away, Mr. Marmont?" she inquired sweetly—"if any should come prowling around."

"I should much prefer to be the shoocr off of the Valerians," he replied.

"Cousin Armand would not permit."

"Cousin Armand is an American himself."

"*Was* an American, you mean. He is King of Valeria now—that is why I am going to Dornlitz."

"That also is why I am going."

"Of course!" she agreed.

"I mean that is *one* of the reasons," he added hastily.

"Second thoughts!" she reminded him.

"Are best," he added.

"When they require deliberation—not when they are a simple statement of fact, as in this case. Second thoughts then savor of—prevarication."

"I reckon, you score!" he laughed.

"Yes! I reckon I do," she replied, looking up at him again through drooping lashes—a trick of hers that was very taking.

They were walking close, and ever and anon he could feel the touch of hip and arm, as they swung along.

"Aren't you afraid," said he, "that some time you will try those fascinating eyes of yours on the wrong chap?"

"The 'sometime' hasn't come—yet," she answered, and deliberately gave him another look.

"No—but it is coming. Human nature isn't ice, nor stone, nor iron."

"It would be a chilly world, if it were," she rejoined.

"As chilly as the Valerian nobility in search of a wife," he assented. "What will you select—a duke, a marquis, an earl, or——"

"A gentleman," she added.

"Gentlemen are not in the running. Nothing less than an earl will meet the requirements."

"Why not a prince? His Majesty's cousin surely has rank enough! Yes, I think it will be a prince."

"Your Serene Highness!" he said, with a low bow.

"I think I prefer your Royal Highness!" she announced.

"Your Royal Highness!" he said, and bowed again.

"Yes, I am sure I shall like it."

"It is a long way removed from a simple commoner—like Mrs. Jones, for instance," he observed.

"It is, indeed."

"Or like Mrs. Marmont."

The audacity of him fairly took her breath.

"Mrs. Marmont isn't quite so bad as Mrs. Jones," she managed to reply.

"But as compared to 'her Royal Highness,' it is very bad, indeed?"

She nodded. "Don't you think so?" she asked.

"My opinion is not material. I'm not a woman."

"To be sure, you're not—I had forgot!" she laughed.

"You thought you were talking with Mrs. Jones?"

"No—with Mrs. Marmont."

"Oh! you mean that you were talking to yourself?" he asked.

"I wasn't aware that I was Mrs. Marmont," she said.

"You're not—yet," he replied.

"I'm relieved!" she mocked.

"——but you will be before the year is out," he went on.

"Pleasant prospect!"

"I'm charmed with it, too."

"Isn't it nice that we always agree?" she scoffed.

"Delightful!—it augurs well for our future."

"Which do I marry first—the prince or you?" she asked,—"or am I a bigamist?"

"It is awkward to be a bigamist, so I reckon you'll have to marry me. We'll dismiss the prince from consideration."

"The prince may object?"

"Sure he may—he wouldn't be a prince if he didn't."

"And maybe I shan't dismiss him—maybe it will be *you* whom I dismiss."

"That is an impossible situation. I cannot even imagine it."

"It *is* a bit difficult— to one who always has got what he wants!" she laughed.

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you."

"I decline to imagine it."

"Naturally!—you would decline to imagine any situation affecting yourself which you can't control."

"Am I as bad as all that?" he asked.

"As what?" she asked.

"Do I impress you as being self-absorbed?"

"Not exactly; more compelling, I should say —as one who always gets what he wants in a quiet way."

"Isn't that rather creditable?"

"At least, it's not discreditable."

"And am I not to get this, also?"

"What?" she asked, with another of her tempting looks.

"You!" said he.

"Me!" she echoed, laughing. "You forget the prince has the first chance. Way for the prince! monsieur, way for the prince!"

"Away with the prince, you mean," said he.

"That may come later."

"It will come later."

"Then where is the ground for your quarrel?"

"With the delay."

"Impatient of delay, are you? You forget that after the prince, come the duke and the marquis, and the earl, and the baron—and then, the gentleman."

"In other words, I haven't a ghost of a chance."

"I didn't say so."

"You implied it."

"No—again you inferred it—and I am not responsible for your inferences."

"Then I have a chance?"

"I didn't say so."

"What did you say?" he asked.

"Something about the order of my choice. I didn't scratch your name. On the contrary, if it is scratched, *you* scratched it."

"It is *not* scratched," he replied.

"Then you are willing to give place to the nobility?"

"I'm willing to take my chances *with* the nobility."

"You have four more days without them!" she smiled.

"How much nicer if you had said: 'We have four more days without them.'"

"*We* have four more days without them," she repeated, moving just out of distance.

"You little tease!" he said—"with your princes and your dukes and your nobility. If you plague

me so with them now, what will you do when they're an actuality, at your beck and call!"

"You paint an attractive picture—princes and dukes at my beck and call—Oh!"

"Its companion picture, however, is not so attractive," he answered.

"And it?"

"Represents the beck and call *after* marriage —I leave it for you to fill in the *dramatis personae*."

"And may I fill in whomever I want?" she asked.

"Is it you who will do the filling in?" he replied.

"Because," she continued, "I shall probably fill in——"

He took a step toward her.

"I shall probably fill in—the one I chance to—love," she ended.

"But who doesn't love you," he said.

"Does that necessarily follow? I might be moved to fill in you. No! no! sir," retreating to her cabin door. "I said I *might*, not that I would. At present, the canvas is blank. Good night, Mr. Marmont! Here come cousin Armand and Mr. Courtney—I'll leave you to them. Sweet dreams, *mon ami!*"

"Of you?" he asked.

"Of me—if you wish."

And with a tantalizing smile she vanished in her room.

XI

THE ACCIDENT OF POSITION

We went to the Savoy in London, where Mrs. Courtney met us. She and Miss De Marcellin fell in love with each other at once. They were the same age, practically,—twenty-six and twenty-three respectively—and Helen confided to me that "Hildegarde is a perfect dear." Which sentiment Hildegarde also confided to me respecting Helen—I knew Helen was much more than a "perfect dear," and I was very willing to accept Helen's judgment about Hildegarde; particularly, as I quite agreed with it. Moreover, I would have agreed even had I thought otherwise.

It always is well to agree to non-essentials—especially with one's wife. It promotes amity in the family, and concedes nothing that really matters. My observation has been that a husband and wife almost invariably go on the rocks because of disagreements and bickerings over questions which the man should have left to the woman—they being of no importance whatever among those larger questions which are for his decision, and as to which the wife is usually more than ready to submit to his more experienced judgment. I am—but again I grow reflective and garrulous, and wander from the record.

We remained in London two days, which the De Marcellins spent in the shops—in company with Mrs. Courtney, who piloted them about, and, incidentally, bought a few things herself. The King, with Moore and me, pottered around; visited Parliament, had tea on the Terrace with the ladies, and, on the last day of our stay, nearly gave Count Pifferheim, the Valerian Ambassador to the Court of St. James, an attack of apoplexy, when we happened to encounter him in the dining-room of the Savoy.

The King nodded to him, put his fingers on his lips to impose silence, and went on with our party to our seats in the opposite corner of the room.

The Count understood that he was commanded to have seen no one, but he also knew that he did not understand. For a hundred years and more it had been the custom of the service, when his Majesty was pleased to travel incognito in foreign lands, that his Ambassador should always be notified of his coming—and he was held accountable for his safety. It was utterly unheard of for the King to—— However, it was this king's way!—just another manifestation of his American independence, and of his impatience of restraint.

Before we left, the King dispatched Moore to the Count's table to summon him across, where he told him he was returning to Dornlitz that night, and, after a glass of wine, dismissed him.

"Just to keep him in a good humor and from

wondering. There is nothing like gratifying a diplomat's curiosity!" said the King, with a sly laugh at me.

We crossed the Channel on the night boat and took the Orient Express, which was due at Dornlitz the next afternoon. Moore had wired ahead in his own name and had a car reserved for us, which was attached to the rear of the train. After we had started, he disclosed that the King of Valeria was abroad, so that we should not be disturbed by the custom officials at the various borders.

"Now, I reckon, you are easy," said the King, as we sat in the *salon.*

"Yes, I am," said I. "You are safely out of America, and, hereafter, you may look out for yourself. My responsibility ended when we docked at Liverpool. Possibly you were not aware that I had any responsibility for you, but nevertheless I felt it, both for myself and because of the Princess —I mean the Queen."

"I know, Dick!" said he—and held out his hand. "Possibly my coming to America, in the way I did, was imprudent—assuredly was it with Lotzen there also, and in the same city."

"Where is he now—and his Jackal, I wonder."

"With Spencer and De Varenne, it is safe to assume."

"And where are they?"

"In the Ferida Palace, or in Lotzen Castle—the latter, being in the mountains, is the more likely.

It is a better headquarters for his plotting than the Ferida; moreover, it will permit him to sound my intentions at a distance, so to speak. I might ignore his presence there, whereas I would be compelled to take notice of it, if he were in Dornlitz."

"And you will let him remain wherever he is—you have determined?" I asked.

He nodded. "If he wants to make another try, I shall not balk him."

"Her Majesty may object."

"Yes—she may!" he laughed. "It shall be my business to convert her. What do you think of me as a missionary?"

"As successful as the most," said I. "They usually do nothing but make a lot of trouble both for the natives and their home government—set everything and everybody by the ears, and then let out a yell for help."

"At least, I'll not let out any yell for help," replied the King.

"Then you are not a missionary," said I. "With them that is the only thing that is sure. They, as a class, occasion more difficulty for their respective Foreign Departments than all the rest of the nation—as you doubtless know, being a king."

"I *do* know it," he replied; "and as we are unanimous on that subject, it won't profit to discuss it. I'm apt to lose my temper over it and be most undiplomatic. The missionary is simply a proselytist, and he has no one to blame but himself

if he experiences hardships, ill-treatment and death. If a man in Washington, or Dornlitz, or London voluntarily did that which may entail suffering on himself, the nation wouldn't stop a moment to rescue him. He would have to suffer. The whole difficulty is that the missionary is either a fanatic, who thinks he is 'called,' or he is one who can't make a living at home so he gets a summons to enlighten the heathen—while the heathen, ninety-nine times in a hundred, are the more enlightened of the two. The Christians are so cock sure they have the only train for Salvation and the Hereafter that it is irritating. If they are right in their theory, they would much better devote the time to saving the unbelievers in their own land—it would give them all the occupation they need—and then some. Confound it! Courtney, why did you start the subject?—let us talk of something else than missionaries."

"We were discussing Lotzen!" I laughed.

"Better Lotzen than missionaries—better anything than missionaries."

"Where is her Majesty?" I asked.

"At the Summer Palace—waiting to receive us, God bless her!"

"Is she aware that Lotzen is in Valeria?"

"I don't know, she did not mention it in the letter I found waiting for me in London, though that is no indication. She wouldn't annoy me by telling it even if she did know—and then there is the pos-

sibility that she took the matter in her own hands and had him escorted out of the country. Dehra has the Dalberg way, Dick, as you are aware."

"It is a good way, when *she* exercises it," I commented.

"And a bad way, when *I* exercise it!" he laughed.

"Occasionally," said I—and added: "You're not always rash nor headstrong."

"I'll have difficulty in convincing her that I'm not rash in permitting Lotzen to remain in Valeria. In fact, I anticipate about as much trouble in converting her to my view as in laying the Duke by the heels. It will go a long way with her that you approve. She has faith in your counsel and sagacity."

"Bosh!" I said. "Tell her of your star and dilate on your destiny—that will convince her. A woman is impressionable."

"That is the first time I've ever known you to give poor advice. Do you think Mrs. Courtney would be convinced by a star and destiny?"

"It depends on who told her. *I* could persuade her!"

"You could persuade her that the moon was made of green cheese!" he scoffed.

I laughed consciously. He was right. I could not.

"And no more can I convince Dehra," said he.

"Maybe the De Varenne woman lied—maybe Lotzen did not go to Valeria."

"Then Bigler lied also."

"Which would not be in the least surprising," said I, "though in this instance I think he told the truth."

"We shall soon know," said Armand. "Meanwhile, it is good to be going home and almost there —and to know you're sure of a welcome. That is the most in life, after all."

"And your work!" I added.

"It's the welcome that makes the work worth while, Dick—at least, to me."

"And it's the work that makes Dehra a Queen and your son the Heir Apparent to a throne."

"True!" said he, and laughed. "I can't escape it."

"You wouldn't, if you could—and, what is more, you know it; your very desire to put an end to Lotzen proves it. Do you talk such rot to anyone but me?"

"Only to Dehra—when I'm a bit in the dumps."

"Are you in the dumps now?"

"Not at all—it's just force of habit, when I'm with you."

"That is like most men—you grumble only with your wife and your best friend."

"Precisely—the grumbles never go any farther!" he laughed.

Presently we said good-night and retired.

I was awakened, some hours later, by a jolt which sent me sprawling. Then there was a crash of breaking timbers and glass, a bumping over ties, a

swaying from side to side in a sickening fashion, as though the car could not determine which way to fall; followed finally by a sudden cessation of forward movement and a righting of itself.

"We are in an accident," I thought obviously.

And all our party must have had the same thought at the same moment, judging from the way every man of us stuck his head out his compartment in an inquiring way, and the ladies shrieked. I slipped on my coat and trousers over my pajamas and stepped out. The hiss of escaping steam, the cries of those in distress, the shouts of the men, the wails of the women, all came to us in a moment.

It was four o'clock—by the schedule we should have been in the vicinity of the Valerian border. The lights had gone out in the car, but the flames from something burning to the front were lighting up the scene.

"Where are we?" said the King, as we swung ourselves to the ground.

"Near the Valerian line, if we're on time," I answered, and we started to investigate.

It was a gruesome sight. The train, composed of ten cars, had been ditched, and was little else than a tangled mass of wood and iron. The coaches were piled on the bank. Ours alone remained upright, though its trucks had been ripped loose and were almost at right angles to the track—occurring when the emergency brakes went on at the parting of the train. The engine lay in the bed of a small

stream along with two baggage cars, one of which had already caught fire from the engine, and were burning furiously, like a funeral pyre. The groans of the wounded were punctuated by the shouts of the rescuers, and the crackle of the flames, and by the driving smoke which at times swept down and enveloped everything.

It is not my purpose to describe the horrors of a wreck—it is not necessary to my record. Moreover, I am not fond of horrors, so I shall pass them by—being thankful that we all were spared any but those of the eye. They were dreadful enough, even to see.

We found that we were across the border, and that Porgia, five miles away, was the nearest town. Word was at once despatched there—and in an incredibly short time a train arrived with a battalion of the garrison, and all the hospital service and surgeons the town and barracks held. The King, with his hat pulled down over his face to conceal his identity and muffled in a long coat, left the control to Moore, who, having disclosed his rank and office, took absolute charge, for the railroads in Valeria are operated by the Government. Then when he had seen the wounded off for Porgia, and everything had been done that was possible, Moore turned over the command to the senior officer present and followed with the uninjured in the second relief train. The sun was just rising as we started.

We were standing together in the rear of the

last car, a bit awed to silence by the tragedy and the narrow margin by which we had missed grievous injury or death, when the King spoke.

"Do any of you know what caused the accident?" he asked.

We shook our heads.

"I detailed Major Schroder to investigate," said Moore.

"I investigated it myself, a little," the King returned—"enough to satisfy me that it was not an accident——"

"What!" I exclaimed.

"Distinctly *not* an accident," he repeated. "I found, where the engine left the track, the left rail had been deliberately taken up and was lying in the ditch four feet away."

"Lotzen!" said I.

"You may draw your own inferences!" said the King.

"What would have happened if our car had been put in the centre of the train where it belonged, instead of on the rear?" Moore reflected.

"It wasn't, so we do not need to speculate. The star seems to be a good protector, Courtney—thus far!" he laughed.

XII

THE DREAM-WOMAN

Two hours later, in the Castle of Lotzen, the Duke was breakfasting with Madeline Spencer.

"You are looking charming this morning, my duchess," he said, as he bent and kissed her. "Verily, you seem to grow younger every day."

"Five years younger than when you first met me?" she whispered, caressing his cheek with the faintest touch of her finger tips.

"Yes, five years—and more," he replied. "I don't know how you do it—but you do it, *ma belle.* You're not over eighteen, little girl, not over eighteen!" and he kissed her again—and long.

"You are such a boy!" she laughed, slipping her arm around his neck. "Such a wilful, spoiled boy! Such a dear boy. . . . Now—go over to your place and let us have breakfast. There! Now go."

With a bit of a laugh, he went.

"For a time," he said.

He passed by the huge South window, which overlooked the valley of the Dreer, and the road to Porgia running like a streak of silver into the distant town. He stood for a moment looking down it before he turned and assumed his place. Her look had followed his—and she searched his face with a swift glance.

"A fine morning," she said. "Shall we ride?"

"Yes! If you will wear the scarlet habit."

"I will wear whatever you wish," she answered, flashing him a fascinating smile. "But don't you think the scarlet is a trifle gaudy?"

"Not for the mountains."

"I might be taken for the Colonel of the Red Huzzars!"

"The American would be complimented, surely," he replied.

"I'm not so sure," she answered. "His Majesty does not take kindly to me, you know."

"Nor to me, either. Well, we shall see!"

"What?" she asked, leaning a little forward. "What shall we see?"

"That is the question."

"What do you wish to see?"

"A dead American!" he answered shortly.

"Doubtless—but will you see it?"

"I have hopes."

"In the course of nature?"

"Nature is a slow fatality," he answered. "I trust for something more suddenly effective."

"For instance?"

"My own sword—would give me the most satisfaction."

"But that is—doubtful?"

"The chances would be against me," he admitted.

"Then I will not let you take the chances," she said decisively.

"You care?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Time was when you urged me to the trial."

"That time has passed," she answered, and reaching across the small table she took his hand. "Abandon it, dear—what will it profit you if the King die?"

"Satisfaction!" he replied, raising her fingers to his lips.

"You risk too much—it will not make you King."

"It will, at least, advance me one nearer the Throne."

"And what is one, with the Queen and the Prince alive!"

"Life is very uncertain," he reflected.

"It is for every one."

"You mean that the American may kill me?"

"It is not unlikely," she admitted—"and, even at the best, the chances are three to one against you. It is not in the range of the possible for you to succeed."

"Stranger things than that have happened."

"When they do, they mark an epoch."

"Then you have no faith in my success?"

"None!—the odds are too heavy." She arose and went around the table to him. "Give up this foolish notion of revenge. It comes too high, dear—it comes too high!" She curled herself upon his knee, one lovely arm about his neck, her face close to his. "Let us back to Paris, dear, and the joys of the last five years."

"To Paris?" he smiled.

"To wherever you wish—so that we leave Valeria."

"You do not like Valeria, little one?"

"You know that I do not."

"Nor anything Valerian?"

"Nor anything Valerian—save you."

"And if I stay a little while?" he asked.

"Then I'll stay with you—but why stay?"

"So I can plague the American by my presence!" he smiled.

"You know better than that—he will not be plagued—either he will ignore you utterly, or he will summarily eject you from the Kingdom—presumably the latter."

"You think so?"

"I do. The King is my countryman and I know him better than you do, dear. He isn't to be frightened by a threat—least of all by a vague threat. You have always insisted on under-rating his ability. Believe me, he has the capacity to rule, as well as the capacity to fight. Moreover, you have the Queen to reckon with also. Armand may be willing to ignore your presence in the Kingdom, but she may over-rule him. I have observed, in the past, that she is a child of her House, and has a mind of her own."

"I fancy, it is just as well she married the American—for her own peace of mind," he reflected.

"Not to mention yours, Duke," she said slyly.

"If I had married her, I would be King," he replied.

"Aye!—that's the rub—and for it you bear Armand an everlasting grudge."

"A grudge which, with the Devil's permission, I shall pay before I die," he replied.

It was said with a smile, and his voice was soft and calm as her own, but she felt that it was not an empty boast. He might wait five years, and again five, and yet five more, but he would be ever waiting his opportunity. Five years she had been with him in Paris and Vienna, and over Europe and Asia, and scarcely a word had fallen from him to remind her of what he had been, and of what he was now. Seemingly, he lived only for the present —never in the past; yet she knew that deep in his heart the fire of revenge was burning, and that he was but biding his time.

"Would you be content if the King—ceased to reign?" she asked.

"You put it neatly!" he laughed. "Yes—I think I should be content. If I could myself be the direct means of the ceasing, I should be entirely content."

"You mean, if your own hand could kill him?"

He nodded slowly.

"If the American had never come!" he reflected.

"If the American had never come, Frederick would have made the decree in Dehra's favor, just the same," she said—"and he might have put in it the stipulation that she should not marry her cousin Ferdinand. His late Majesty had little love for you, as I remember."

"I think he would have left it to the Princess to decide. But even if he had put it in the decree, I would be near the Throne, with a voice in the Council, and with the offices to which my rank entitles me. If the American had never come, I——"

"You would never have known me, sweetheart," she said.

"And that is some compensation," he replied—and kissed her. And she returned the kiss.

Did she love him? I do not know. I think she did not know, herself. Once was when she had loved Armand. Maybe she loved him still. A woman is a queer compound and defies analysis. Possibly, it will be nearer right to say that she loved Lotzen as well as she could now love any man. She was true to him, and handled him with the ease of an adept; being careful that he did not leave her for long, and that always her welcome was awaiting him. He never saw her save when she was alluringly fascinating—save when she appealed to his senses. He never penetrated the privacies of her boudoir, save when she permitted—and she was much too clever to let him see her, save at her best. There was a method to her kisses and embraces which made them none the less sweet to the Duke—who never knew. There lay her cleverness: he never knew—never even suspected.

And this present move of his was not to her liking. It threatened her future. He had married her morganatically, it is true, but the bulk of his

fortune, she knew, would go by the law of Valeria to his brother Charles, and she cared not to risk the leavings. He was open-handed and open-hearted—she lived in all the ease and luxury her soul craved—her every wish was gratified. So, for selfish reasons alone, she did not want him to risk his life in another and, to her mind, a fruitless try for Armand's life. She had stood with him gladly enough when he had a chance for the Crown—but that chance was gone, five years ago, and there would not be a third try, if she could prevent it.

She sat on his knee, one arm still around his neck, while with her long slender fingers she gently rumpled his hair.

"Promise me," she said softly, "promise me that you will do nothing to provoke a personal encounter with Armand."

"I promise—unless the odds are all in my favor. I've not forgot the Vierle Masque, nor the King's library. The King's library!" he reflected. "What an opportunity was that!—and all lost by the margin of a minute. Were I superstitious, I should think I couldn't win against the American."

"Better be a trifle superstitious then. Abandon what the Fates have decreed is lost and think no more about it," she urged.

"It is against human nature to abandon a crown. If you had been born in the shadow of a throne, and had been the Heir Presumptive almost from birth, would you forego it, so long as life were in you?"

"I should not forego it—neither should I strive for it against the overwhelming odds that have suddenly intervened. I should bide my time."

"Bide your life-time, you mean!" he laughed.

"And while biding, I should enjoy life."

"You are a philosopher—which I am not."

"It is difficult to be a philosopher under the circumstances, I know," putting her head close to his.

"It is not so difficult when I am with you, sweetheart," he replied.

She smiled down at him. "Then it shall be for me to be with you more hereafter. . . . No! sir,—not now!" starting up and springing back. "Come out on the wall, and be good."

He followed her obediently, and she let him swing her up on the parapet, putting one slender, arched foot in its narrow patent-leather slipper on his knee while he tied the ribbon. Then he squeezed her ankle; whereat he was promptly chidden and made to stand aside.

"You are as alluringly tantalizing to me this very minute, Madeline, as you were five years ago," he said.

"And wouldn't you have me so?" she asked.

"Yes—but what other woman could have managed it!"

"Plenty could—had they tried."

"Not unless they had your face and figure—your soft voice and charming ways—your bewitching aloofness and winning intimacy—your——"

"Stop! Ferdinand," she cried gayly. "Save the rest for another time. You have earned a kiss, come and take it. . . . . Now, dear, sit here beside me, and let us cease this nonsense——"

"For—the present," he interrupted.

"For the present be it—so long a present as I make it."

"Only do not make it over-long," he replied. . . . . He drew himself up beside her and took her hand.

"This is permitted?" he asked.

She smiled, and her fingers pressed his in answer.

"Yonder, if I be not mistaken, comes the Count," she said presently, pointing down the valley to the south, where a horseman was approaching.

"It is the Count," he replied after a pause.

"He rides alone for his pleasure?" she asked.

"He rides alone, but whether it be for his pleasure, or for his business, or simply to get back, he will have to answer—if it really matters," he smiled.

"It doesn't matter!" she smiled back, "I only wondered casually why Claire was not with him."

"Sleeping, I suppose," looking toward the nearing rider. "That is where she differs from you, Madeline. You are always ready to go with me."

"Because you always want me. Maybe Bigler didn't want her."

"What I was thinking!" he smiled.

He might have said that Bigler rode alone that morning by his express desire. And she might

have said that she suspected it. There was little that the Duke kept from her, and what he did keep she suspected—but she never let him know it. Which was another proof of her cleverness. And while he thought that she suspected, he admired her the more for keeping silence and permitting him to act as though she did not know. Which was clever in him, also—but not so clever as it was in her.

"When does the King leave London?" she inquired.

"He left last evening," he replied, without taking his glance from the nearing Bigler.

An amused smile came into her eyes—but he did not see it.

"When do you think he will return to Valeria?" she asked indifferently.

"I don't know—it depends."

"On what?"

"The train, for one thing."

"And the track, for another!" she laughed.

He regarded her thoughtfully a moment.

"The track, if you wish," he said.

"The track is rather more important than the train, isn't it?"

He pulled at his black moustache, that hid the suggestion of a smile.

"Yes, I think it is," he replied.

She fell to studying the lights and shadows on the surrounding mountains, he eyeing her, furtively, the while.

"It is a beautiful country, dear," she reflected.

"I suppose it is."

"And you love it?"

His smile broadened. "I was not aware that I loved it."

"Neither was I—but it did no harm to inquire."

"No, it did no harm—though a trifle superfluous."

"Superfluities are much more entertaining than riddles," she responded.

"Especially riddles which you are unable to answer."

"I never waste energy to try."

"Nor I—when I can't. The answer is coming up the road."

"I see nothing coming up the road but Bigler," she said—though knowing well what he meant.

"And Bigler brings the answer—whether the American went through to Dornlitz, or whether he did not."

"And if he did *not?*"

"We shall hasten across the border," he answered lightly.

She did not ask for more information—she was content to wait until Bigler came. She possessed a woman's natural curiosity, but she had cultivated it to patience, and it did not rule her.

The Duke moved closer, and together they watched the Count ride over the drawbridge and into the court-yard. A groom ran out and took his horse. As he dismounted, he saw the couple on the wall. The Duke motioned him up.

"What news?" he asked, when Bigler appeared.

"I have to announce that his Majesty arrived safely at Porgia, this morning, and left, half an hour later, by special train for Dornlitz."

Lotzen smiled grimly.

"I expected it!" he said. "We are playing in ill luck—the cards are always against us."

"It seems that the Orient Express, to which the King's special car was attached, was wrecked about five miles west of Porgia, with heavy loss of life to all but the King's party. His car alone was not overturned. It was on the rear of the train—if it had been in the middle, it would have been smashed, and his Majesty would, in all probability, have been grievously injured or even killed."

"His luck again!" was the Duke's comment.

"Yes, his luck!—I'm beginning to think he is invulnerable. Three attempts in America, one on the steamer, and now this wreck—and he escapes unharmed from them all. The Devil must surely have him in his keeping."

"Insult not your master needlessly!" the Duke remarked curtly.

"On the contrary, I am complimenting him," the Count retorted. "As a protector, he is some success."

Lotzen turned to Mrs. Spencer.

"Has the Count answered your question sufficiently?" he asked.

"With commendable accuracy," she replied.

She understood that the wreck was another attempt on the King's life, and that it had been unsuccessful—but she was not interested in the details, nor in the means employed, nor in the number killed and injured.

"Is Mr. Courtney with the King?" she asked.

"Yes—the old meddler is with him."

"He was with him in the other contest," said Lotzen—"and I have always thought, Madeline, it was his counsel that sent Armand flying in pursuit of us, and checkmated me on the very threshold of success. And for that, I owe him a grudge."

"Which, some day, we will pay," said Bigler.

"That, Count, is on the knees of the gods," the Duke returned, with a peculiar smile.

"Courtney is no longer the American Ambassador," the Count flung out.

"Just so!" was the answer. "Perhaps——" and he smiled again.

"It is on to the Capital now, I suppose," said Bigler.

"We shall wait here a few days," said the Duke.

"I thought, when you were in Dornlitz the other day, you arranged with Retz and the rest to meet you at the Ferida to-morrow."

"I did. But that was contingent upon a vacancy in the royal dignity. Now I shall bide here a bit—and view the outlook. The perspective may be better from a distance. But we will go to Dornlitz, never fear."

XIII

THE ADVANTAGE OF POSITION

Dehra and Armand—the Queen and the King, were perhaps more appropriate—though they had been five years married, were lovers still. They liked to get away from the crowd—to be alone with each other, without any of the ceremony and attendance of a court. With the Queen, who was born to ceremony and attendance, it was not so irksome. It bothered her but little, indeed, whether a lady-in-waiting or a chamberlain saw them—to her, they did not count. But to Armand, it was annoying. He did not wish to share his wife, even in so little, with another. He was plebeian enough to prefer that his demonstration of affection should be in private. And she had been quick to appreciate his feelings and to humor them. They took long rides together, they breakfasted alone together, they did much that the ordinary married pair do, who are in love—yet, for the nation, they maintained a gorgeous state and royalty, such as no reign in Valeria had surpassed.

The morning after our arrival in Dornlitz, the royal pair rode away from the private entrance of the Summer Palace, just as the bugles of the garrison were sounding the reveille. He had waved the groom aside and himself put her up—arranging the strap and her skirt with the same gallantry

and courtesy as though he were her suitor instead of her husband. Then he looked up at the proud, sweet face, the glorious hair, and the slender figure, and smiled.

"My beautiful little woman!" he said, and kissed her gauntlet.

"And you're glad we're together again, dear?" she whispered.

"Need you ask?"

"America isn't quite what it used to be?"

"Nothing is quite what it used to be—without you, sweetheart."

She laughed—a little, cooing laugh—and let her hand fall for an instant on his shoulder.

"For which reason, I shall, when we reach a shady spot in the forest, kiss you, sir," she said—"that is, if you want a kiss?"

He gave her an adoring glance. "As much as when you gave me the first kiss, dear."

"That was a long time ago," she reflected.

"It doesn't seem so long to me."

She shot him a sidelong look through her lashes.

"Oh! doesn't it?" Then she laughed. "Nor to me, either—— Do you remember what else occurred just before I kissed you?"

"In the Hanging Garden? Yes! I surely do. Madeline Spencer had claimed me as her husband —and you—you had sufficient trust in me to believe my simple denial. I shall never forget it, sweetheart."

"I don't want you to forget it," she smiled. "So long as you don't forget you will love me?"

"And so long as *you* love me," pressing her fingers, "I shall not forget."

Then he mounted, and they rode down the avenue and through the North gate.

"Which way?" she asked, as they acknowledged the salute of the guard—"toward town?"

"No!—around by the Old Forge, and back by the hill above the Park," he answered.

A sly smile came into her eyes.

"Isn't it rather far?" she asked.

"Don't you want to go that way?"

"I didn't say I didn't want to go."

"Because," he continued, "I shall always have a fond recollection of the hill above the Park—do you know why?"

"It is so very beautiful," she answered.

"It is very beautiful, but that is not the reason. I should adore it were it the bleakest hillside in the world. You're laughing!—you, too, remember! It was there we first met, and you carried my heart with you when you went slowly down that forest by-path."

"You foolish boy!" she said softly.

"Foolish! Aye! always foolish about you, sweetheart—particularly foolish now, when I've just returned from so long an absence."

She smiled, and reaching over patted his bridle hand.

"Foolish!" she repeated. "Foolish!"

Presently, the road led under a great mass of tangled vines festooned from the trees on either side and overhanging the track.

"Now, for my kiss!" said he, and reined over close.

"Some one might see!" she temporized.

"Foolish!" he retorted.

And putting his arm around her waist he drew her down and kissed her on the lips.

"Suppose some one saw, and said that you kissed another?" she said.

"Let them!"

"You would kiss another than me?"

"Not when I can kiss you!" he replied—and drew her down again.

"Dear! do be good!" she implored. "One would think we were only just betrothed."

"I feel that way," he replied. "I've always felt so, sweetheart."

She drew out of distance quickly.

"Some one is coming," she said.

"It is only a man—if it were a woman, she might tell."

"You're right," she agreed. "I'm a woman, but I admit the charge is justified. Do you think he saw us?"

"No! he didn't see us!" he laughed. "He had not turned the bend, at the moment of—contact."

"You're just a great big boy, dear."

"And you're a charmingly bewitching little girl."

"You always say such nice things—and just as though you meant them."

"And they're nice because you know that I do mean them," leaning toward her.

"Who is this ahead?" she asked, a moment later.

"I don't know."

"It looks like Baron Retz. . . . It is he."

"He rides early," said Armand.

"He does—some mischief afoot for somebody, I warrant."

"Hum! I never could understand why your father made him Minister of Justice—Injustice would have been more appropriate."

"He is an able man—and my father knew how far to trust him. Moreover, it was a sop to his Faith and his People. I can't abide him, however."

"The dispatch with which his resignation was accepted, when you became Regent, was sufficiently indicative of your opinion," he laughed.

"He was an adherent of Lotzen's."

"Which was enough for you," he teased.

She gave him a sly look, and stirred her horse with the spur.

Retz reined aside, as he recognized who came, and saluted.

The King and Queen returned it with punctilious politeness, and trotted by.

The Baron looked after them with a sullen, snarling smile—but his lips did not speak.

"Retz always reminds me of a reptile," said Dehra. "His little glittering eyes are snake-like in their malevolence."

"They are true to nature, right enough," Armand returned. "If he could injure me, he would be only too ready. He hates me with an enduring hate."

"I wonder why he was riding here at this early hour?" she reflected. "Retz, I fancy, isn't one to bestir himself for the love of nature."

"Nature? Not he. Love of self would alone move him."

"We have never before met him."

"We've never before met any one, at this hour, but the farmers going to market!" he laughed.

"Just so—and we have been riding here for five years—therefore what is Retz up to?"

"The road is a public highway," he suggested.

"A rogue, alone, on a secluded portion of the King's highway, is suspicious of crime," she replied.

"What will you do about it?" he smiled.

"I shall give the Secret Police something to occupy them."

"Rather undue importance to Retz, is it not?"

"Perhaps—and perhaps not. He is welcome to it, if I am wrong. *You* don't object, dear?"

"I? I don't object to anything you do, sweetheart. Chop his head off, if you wish—or have it done."

"I do not doubt Retz richly deserves to lose his

head," she replied. "He is in the same class with Lotzen. Thank heaven, we are freed of *his* presence. I wish we had sent Retz packing over the border, also. The fellow annoys me—every time I see him he annoys me more. I'm positively peevish at the sight of his smirkingly false face."

"I see where Retz has his path foreordained for him!" he said. "You are a good hater, sweetheart."

"And so are you. It is the Dalberg in us. We love, as we hate—in full measure."

"I'm glad that you love me!"

"It is mutual, sire!" she laughed. "You hate Lotzen, too."

"I think I despise him more than I hate him," he answered—"then, too, I can never forget that I won what he lost—you, dear."

"And I can never forget that you saved me from him. Ough! it gives me the horrors to think of having him for husband."

"Then you think I'm an improvement on Lotzen?"

"This isn't a good place to fish," she retorted.

"On horseback, you mean?"

She flung him a taunting smile and raced away—nor drew rein until the Old Forge was reached.

"Delightful!" she exclaimed, pushing the hair out of her eyes and setting in place her hat, while their horses drank from the mountain trough, and nosed each other.

"Pretty fine!" he echoed, dismounting and slipping the bridle over his arm.

Then he drew off his gloves, and, making his hands into a cup, caught the water in them and offered it to her.

"Thank you!" she said, when she had drunk. "That was a regular lover's trick, dear."

"Don't you appreciate it?" he asked.

But she only laid her crop lightly across his shoulders—and rode away.

"I wonder," she said, after a while, "if that awful woman is still with the Duke?"

"She is," he answered. "I saw them together in Washington."

"In Washington!" she exclaimed. "You never mentioned it in your letters."

"I did not. It probably would have made you nervous—and Courtney was enough at the nervous business—and he was at hand. He got an idea that Lotzen was going to assassinate me, and he made my life a burden with his precautions and his cares."

"Mr. Courtney was exactly right!" she averred. "I haven't a doubt the precautions were needed."

"I'm here and safe, I believe," he replied.

"Possibly because of those very precautions."

"I don't think the precautions helped, in the least."

"You don't think the precautions *helped!*" she marvelled. "Can you mean that Lotzen attempted your life?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? What do you mean, Armand?"

"I mean that I don't know whether he did or not."

"Some one did try to kill you?"

"So Courtney thinks."

She reined in and sprang down from the saddle.

"Come, sir, not another step until you tell me all—all, do you hear?"

"I'll tell you on the ride back."

"You'll tell me here and now," she replied, and sat down on a fallen tree by the track.

With a laugh, he dismounted.

"If I must, I must," he said, and taking the horses he tied them to a nearby limb. "Now, what shall I tell you, little girl?" he asked, seating himself on the grass at her feet, and taking her hand.

"Why is it that Mr. Courtney thinks your life was attempted?"

"Because I was nearly run down by an automobile."

She nodded. "What more?"

"Because, a second time, I was nearly run down by an automobile."

"The same automobile, by any chance?"

"The same."

"Hum—and was it the same day?"

"The same day—about half an hour later."

"Anything else?" she inquired.

"Not for a week—then a bottle of wine was sent to Courtney when I was with him. He gave it to his valet to open. The man tasted it—and died instantly."

"Mr. Courtney would not have drunk strange wine—unless he thought it came from a friend. In whose name was it sent?"

"In the name of our Ambassador, Von Empfield, with this note enclosed: 'If you drink when you receive this, you will drink with me.'"

"Very clever! Our cousin's own stamp is on the trick. I suppose you did nothing to apprehend him?"

"Nothing!"

She shrugged her shoulders expressively.

"He had already sailed for Europe."

"He had confederates—who were they?"

"Bigler, I fancy."

"Bigler! Was the 'Jackal' along—and did the Duke leave him behind?"

He nodded. "Having come to no hurt, and Lotzen having escaped, it would have profited nothing to have arrested Bigler."

"Perhaps!" she reflected.

"It would only have embarrassed both the United States Government and me. I should have had to lay aside my incognito; it would have had to stir itself—and all to no material purpose."

"Perhaps!" she reiterated.

"Moreover, we must have some regard for the family name!" he laughed. "Lotzen is a Dalberg, you know."

"More's the pity!" she flung back. "I grant you that you did right, but—you haven't told me all! there's more!—what more?"

"On the steamer coming back," he said—and told her of Moore wearing his ulster, the attack upon him, Courtney's blow, and the poisoned dagger.

"Really our cousin surpasses himself!" was her comment. "I could almost fancy he was the instigator of the wreck."

"He was," he replied—"at least, the wreck was intentional. A piece of the rail had been removed."

"You are sure?"

"I made the investigation myself—alone."

"I would rather not believe it—it is too horrible! too horrible! Surely, Lotzen belongs to the dark ages! And yet, for the sake of the name we bear in common"—she ended with a gesture of despairing anger.

"We have nothing but suspicion, so—let it rest. I escaped—that will be his greatest punishment."

"Five attempts on your life in less than three weeks!" she exclaimed.

"And yet I'm in Dornlitz again, and with you—what matters it?" he said gayly.

"It matters for the future. After five years' quiescence, Lotzen has come to life. He contem-

plates your death, dear. He will use every means to accomplish it. Why, oh, why, didn't you kill him when you had the chance and every justification! Twice you had him in your power, and twice you let him go."

"You know, dear, I might not kill any rival for the Crown," he replied.

"No—you might not. Yet it would have been better in the end, if such is to be the recompense," she said vehemently.

"What other recompense could we expect from him! Let us be glad for the five years he slumbered."

She laughed shortly. "The rest hasn't impaired his vigor nor his versatility. What will be his next move?"

"You think there will be a next?" he asked. The talk was coming very well for his plans.

"Does night follow day?" she retorted.

"Where will the next move be?" he said.

"Here—in Valeria, since you are here."

"With him, where?"

"I do not know—in Dornlitz, maybe. He has his friends who will conceal him—Retz, or any of the grafters whom you have offended."

"Suppose there be no concealment—suppose he come openly to the Ferida?"

"It is not supposable on the basis of fact."

"Let us suppose it anyway—what would you advise be done?"

"Have him sent out the country forthwith," she answered instantly.

"Would you?" he asked. "And have him return in secret to Retz or one of his other adherents? I think not."

She frowned thoughtfully, but did not reply.

"Assuming he has come to life again, and that, as you say, he will seek me here, it is wisest, I think, to let him come openly. He is not as dangerous when his residence is known to all Dornlitz as when it is concealed."

"It may be," she said, after a pause. "But there is another way; warn him that when he crosses the Valerian border he will forfeit his estates, and be imprisoned in Lotzen Castle the rest of his life."

"Imprison a rival?"

"He isn't a rival now!—he isn't even a Pretender—he is only a trouble breeder."

"But a trouble breeder who is an expert in his line!" he laughed. "And who, the day after he is imprisoned, will have twice as many friends as he has now."

"Much good they will do him in prison," she commented.

"They may help to get him out of prison."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing—except that it were folly to imprison him."

"What would you do?"

"As I have intimated. Let him come—and let him play his game out to the end."

"What?" she exclaimed. "You would let him try for your life, my dearest?"

"I would—but I don't intend that he shall get my life. I am no longer obligated to spare him. As you say, he isn't even a Pretender now; only a trouble breeder—for me. He seeks revenge—and I shall encourage him in it because it may relieve us of his presence—without the nation knowing aught of the affair. He will work in secret; and, be assured, in the termination only those will be involved who are necessary to his plans—and mine. Thus a scandal will be avoided and the matter will be settled."

"You can't mean, dear, that you—the King—would encourage him in his treason."

"To the end that his treason may be ended—and the Dalbergs rid of him."

"You would stake your life against his?"

"No—I would defend my life from his assaults. He forces the issue—I do not. It is the only way, dear, to procure peace. So long as Lotzen lives we shall be menaced by his plots and deviltry."

"I will not consent!" she declared.

"I told Courtney you would not consent," he replied.

"You told Courtney!"

"Yes. We discussed this matter—and he agreed with me that it was the best way out."

"He approves?" she said, incredulously.

"For once, he approves."

"I am astonished!"

"No more astonished than was I."

She looked him steadily in the eyes a moment. "You have not told me all—there is something you are keeping from me."

He smiled. "I have not told you quite all," he said, and narrated the episode of Hugo's Journal, the meeting with Mlle. de Varenne, and the message which Bigler bore to him from the Duke.

She sat silent the while, drawing figures in the grass with her crop.

"Is that *everything?*" she asked, when he had ended.

"Everything!" he answered.

"You don't know where the Duke is now?"

"I do not."

"The De Varenne woman said he was going straight to Dornlitz."

"She probably lied. The Secret Police do not report his arrival here."

"The Secret Police are not infallible," she observed. "He may be concealed."

"If he wishes to lie concealed, Lotzen Castle is the more probable place."

"But he will come to Dornlitz."

"According to past actions he will come. Our cousin makes no empty threats."

"What is his purpose in coming? He cannot hope to over-ride King Frederick's decree."

"Ask me something easier," he answered. "The Duke's mental processes are somewhat unusual. In this instance, he sends Bigler with a message which is unintelligible in its terms. There is simply an open threat, but its character is undisclosed. And, so far as he knows, I am ignorant of what he threatened. I naturally assume that he intends to deny, before the Council, Hugo's marriage, and to demand proof of its regularity. He thinks that he has destroyed all the evidence of it which was in existence, and will have me helpless. You see what will happen then?"

"You will produce the record, as published in the *Maryland Gazette*."

"I mean—what will happen if his theory is correct, and I have no proof to offer? He will deny my right to the Crown and my capacity to transmit it to our son. In other words, he will assert that he is next in line to you, and that Henry and I are ineligible."

"How ridiculous!" she exclaimed.

"It is not ridiculous, my dear. Courtney is of the opinion that it would be very serious indeed, if I could not refute it. He says that the presumption of the regularity of a marriage does not obtain where thrones are involved—and presumption would be all I have left to sustain my claim—the Journal and the Register being destroyed."

"I can see it would raise a nasty question," said Dehra—"if you were not forearmed. What a providential thing was that visit to your old home,

and your discovery of the theft!" She laughed. "I want to be at the Council, and see our cousin's face when you produce the record and checkmate him."

"But when is the checkmate to occur? Why does he simply ask to be unmolested while in Valeria? Is it because he wants time for plotting before he springs his trap? What does that plotting comprehend? And lastly, shall we suffer what he wishes?"

"The risk!—the awful risk, to you, dearest!" she shuddered.

"The risk is trifling!" he laughed. "For my part, I would rather have him here than across the border, if he is moved to activity."

"He is on the spot," she argued.

"So are we—with all the advantage of position."

"But we can't take position until he has taken his. Moreover, you wish to avoid a scandal, and that will necessitate letting few into our confidence."

"We will take more, if the situation require it."

"You're so rash and headstrong, dear."

"I'll promise to be neither," he said. "I've other responsibilities now which I did not have five years ago," and he kissed her hand.

"Am I a responsibility?" she asked.

"Every joy brings its corresponding responsibility."

"Now, I'm a joy!" she laughed.

"You're all things to me," he answered.

The bell of the Cathedral began to chime the hour. She sprang up.

"We must be off!" she exclaimed. "I'm due at the Palace now."

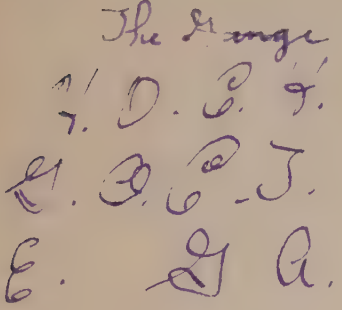
He untied the horses and they cantered briskly away.

"And what shall we do about Lotzen?" he inquired, as they reached the crest of the hill above the Palace.

She looked at him with her adorable smile, and held out her hand.

"Do as you see fit, sweetheart. Are you not the King?" she said.

He raised her fingers to his lips; then hand in hand they rode down the hill—the same hill that had so sweet a memory for them both.



XIV

THE SUMMONS

Two weeks later, the Duke of Lotzen arrived in Dornlitz. He came quietly, but with no attempt at concealment or disguise. With him were Madeline Spencer, Bigler and Mlle. de Varenne, together with a small retinue of servants.

We were at luncheon on the terrace when Moore reported their arrival. The King glanced at the Queen and smiled—and she smiled back.

"Where did he go—to Ferida Palace?" the King asked.

"Yes, sir," Moore answered.

"Did the sight of him create any sensation on the Avenue?"

"Very considerable."

"How was his greeting—warm or cold?"

"Very cold—only, here and there, applause and cheers. The main effect on the crowd, apparently, was tremendous surprise at his return."

The King nodded to Moore and resumed his luncheon. When it was finished, he drew Dehra and me aside, and the three of us strolled into the Park.

"Well, he has come!" he said. "The next move also is his—if we are to let him remain in Dornlitz. I must confess that the Prime Minister is adamant against us, and her Majesty is only half-hearted in

her consent. You and I, Courtney, are alone in the plan. But I think we will amend it slightly in this respect: we will force him promptly to show his hand before the Council—and then instantly discredit him. It should take from him every adherent but those who are animated by personal dislike for me—and them we can meet. To have attacked me on such a ground, and to have failed, should kill the last trace of sympathy."

"Will he make the charge promptly?" I said.

"We have the means to force him."

"If you force him, won't he suspect that you have a defence?"

"No—for it will never occur to him that I know his play. An attack on my descent is the last thing I would foresee—assuming, of course, he is ignorant of our visit to my old home."

"I think we may readily assume that," said I.

"And when you have discredited him before the Council, will you send him from the country?" the Queen asked.

"Perhaps, in disgust, he will go of his own volition and leave us in peace."

"Possibly—at least for a time."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, we shall see. For my part, I would give Lotzen twelve hours to get across the border—and remain across."

"We can do that after the Council has heard his claim, if you still insist," said Armand. "At present, we know what he will do, and we have the

refutation ready. It is a bit theatrical, but it's more effective than to have him prefer it in writing. He catches the recoil himself instead of by mail. It may teach him a lesson."

"Only to brew another scheme," she said. "Lotzen is too adeptious for close range. He is best across the border. Or if you will not, then at the first overt attempt by him, I should arrest him and confine him in some remote castle for the rest of his days."

The King smiled lovingly at her. "As you have said before, dear."

"And as I, the Head of my House, have a mind to do. As a Dalberg, he is under my exclusive jurisdiction."

He stroked her cheek fondly. "I am afraid, sweetheart, it would react on us by crystallizing all the latent opposition around him—which would be most unfortunate and particularly embarrassing."

She shrugged her shoulders expressively.

"Let us try my plan first—we can imprison him later, if you insist. There is no danger in letting him make his charge to the Council. He won't strike until after it has failed. He anticipates that I shall need time to produce proofs of Hugo's marriage. In the interval, he thinks he will be undisturbed—can go about his plotting leisurely. Possibly, he reckons upon his charges being sustained, in which event, it may be, he will consider

himself sufficiently revenged by having driven me from the Throne and making Henry ineligible."

"In short, the only thing certain is his charge before the Council—if you force him to it at once?" said she.

"As I look at it, yes."

"Then let us force him to it at once."

"It shall be as you wish," he acquiesced. "The Council meets on Tuesday—we shall require him to appear before it then and state his case, but we shall not notify him until Monday afternoon."

"Excellent!" the Queen commented. "In the meantime?"

"We will ignore his presence—but keep him under the strictest surveillance."

"Suppose he should make himself conspicuous by visiting the clubs and wearing his uniform, and even by having the effrontery to come to the ball to-morrow night?" she said.

"I don't think he will venture the last!" the King laughed.

"The two others are bad enough," she replied. "How can we ignore him unless he remains in the Ferida? Suppose you meet him on the Avenue?"

"I shall deliberately not see him. I fancy that once will be sufficient indication for the Court."

"Oh, very well!" she replied. "Have it as you wish; but my way would be to give him six hours to get across the border. I despise Lotzen so much, I would not let him live at large in my

Kingdom. Either absence or imprisonment—with him to choose, and choose at once." Then she smiled her adorable smile, and laid her hand on Armand's arm. "But you are the King, sire,—it is for you to decide."

"Let us compromise, sweetheart," said Armand. "We will call the Council for to-morrow morning and give our cousin notice to appear and prefer his case."

"And if he do not?"

"Then he will be banished the following morning—and duly escorted from Valeria."

"And if he return?"

"You may fix the punishment!" he smiled.

. . . . . .

As a result, General Moore, as his Majesty's personal Aide-de-Camp, at five o'clock that afternoon, in full uniform, attended by his aide and followed by an orderly, rode up to the Ferida.

To the lackey, who was at the door he presented his card and was shown into a reception room. Presently, Count Bigler entered.

Both men bowed formally.

"His Royal Highness will receive you in his library," Bigler said, and bowed Moore out of the room. Then he dropped his formal manner. "There is little change in Dornlitz these five years—at least, little that can be noted casually."

"It is much the same as when you left it," Moore returned. "Some minor changes, but not many."

Bigler grinned. He knew what the other meant by "minor changes."

At a door on the second floor, Bigler waved aside the servant who was in attendance and himself made the announcement. Then he stepped back and went out.

The Duke was seated at a large, flat-topped desk, which stood in the centre of the apartment. By his side, curled up in a couch, was Madeline Spencer, smoking a cigarette. At Moore's entrance, she uncoiled herself and glided to the floor.

"Not so, dear," the Duke said. "I have no secrets from you, sweetheart. Remain." Then he glanced up.

Moore saluted—the Duke's name was still upon the Army roll. Lotzen returned the salute with studied politeness.

"General Moore," he said, "I am at your service. I trust you enjoyed your visit to America."

"I thank your Royal Highness," Moore replied. "It was a rare experience indeed."

"Rare experiences are most delectable." He paused. "You have a communication for me?"

"It has to do with our visit to America," said Moore. "You will recall that, in Washington, you sent word to his Majesty to the effect that unless you were permitted to remain undisturbed in Valeria, you would disclose to the Council and to the House of Nobles certain matters which would seriously embarrass their Majesties. You have now come to Valeria as you purposed. I am directed, there-

fore, by his Majesty to summon you before the Royal Council at the Summer Palace, at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, there to disclose whatever you may deem fit touching the matter referred to by you."

"And what," said the Duke, lighting a cigarette and studying the coal reflectively, "and what if it does not suit me to disclose the matter at this time?"

"As to that I have no instructions," Moore answered.

"What would be your opinion?"

"I have no opinion."

"What would you guess as to the American's course?"

Moore was silent.

"Come, General, you can venture a guess!" said the Duke with a bland smile. "Your master will not be bound by it."

"If you have nothing more to communicate, sir, I shall withdraw," Moore replied.

"Tell the American for me, I shall——"

"I fail to understand," Moore interrupted.

"I say, tell the American for me——"

Moore saluted and turned toward the door.

"——that I shall use my own discretion about attending the Council to-morrow—and, in the meantime," with a mocking laugh—"he is respectfully requested to go to the Devil!"

Moore paused in the doorway and faced about:

"Have you any answer to his Majesty?" he asked.

"I have just given you my answer."

"I did not hear it, my lord."

"That is unfortunate, General, for I never repeat."

The next instant, the door closed behind Moore's back and they heard him go down the corridor.

"He declined to recognize 'the American'!" laughed Madeline Spencer.

"And I decline to call him anything else," said Lotzen.

He sat jabbing at the blotter on the desk. She watched him contemplatively.

"What is the meaning of this sudden move?" said he. "I arrive in Dornlitz at two o'clock, and three hours later I am summoned to a special session of the Council at ten o'clock to-morrow. The American acts quickly."

"He has always acted quickly," said she. "You had no reason to anticipate otherwise."

"Is it a bluff?"

"You will know to-morrow!" she laughed.

"Or does he think that I am bluffing?" he continued.

"Possibly."

"He can't have any proof—we have the only records of the marriage."

"Then why should you object to the summons?" she asked.

"I do not object in the least—but I am—suspicious of what—will happen."

"Didn't you tell me that the Laws of your House require every Dalberg who weds outside of Valeria to submit proof of the marriage before his issue can inherit from him?"

"I did—by decree of Maximilian the First: I doubt, however, if it is known to either Dehra or the American."

"But it is in the Book of Laws?"

"It was there fifteen years ago."

"How does it happen that you did not think of it when you were contesting the Succession with Armand, five years ago?" she asked.

"How does it happen that some things escape you—and are remembered later?" he replied.

"An expensive escape!" she reflected.

"I am not so sure. Frederick, being aware of Maximilian's decree, must have satisfied himself of Hugo's marriage before he reinstated the American in Hugo's place. We, however, start afresh with the records of Hugo's marriage missing."

"You think the Journal and the Register were the only evidences?" she asked.

"Can you suggest another? Ordinarily the register is the only evidence. I took Hugo's Journal, because the American himself had referred to it in my hearing five years ago."

"Then what have you to apprehend?"

"Nothing apparently—hence, I am doubtful."

"Can he have anticipated what you are about to claim?" she asked.

He laughed. "Not he!—though he were as skilful at intrigue as you would make him. He knows that his descent is entirely regular. Moreover, it has been acknowledged—and he is King, damn him! Why should he suspect? Besides, Bigler did not deliver my message until the day he left Washington, which was two days before the American—and during that interval I had him watched most carefully."

"Why did you send him the message until after he had returned to Valeria?" she asked.

"To worry him—and to bring him back at the earliest moment. With him away, Dehra was in control—and she is a very different proposition, I assure you."

"Well, I don't know how much you worried him!" she laughed, "but you surely brought him back and yourself before the Council, about as quickly as it could be managed."

"I am not before the Council—yet," he replied.

She flicked the ash from her cigarette.

"Then you will be across the border by to-morrow night," she answered.

"You think so?" he smiled.

"I do—most undoubtedly. What would *you* do, if you were King?"

"I think I should try to keep him here—and kill him for revenge."

"Armand is not so bloodthirsty, I fancy. He will be content with banishment."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"And with the forfeiture of your estates," she added.

"He would not dare!" he exclaimed.

"He *will* dare, if I know him. It's not so much of a dare—he is the King, you must remember."

"He is only 'the American' to me," he retorted.

"To you—but not to the nation."

"There are a sufficient number of malcontents to——"

"Put themselves in a prison for the remainder of their days." She arose and went to him. "Why have you taken this sudden idea, Ferdinand?" she said. "Did the sight of him in Washington stir you to it?"

"I don't know," he replied, reaching up and drawing her down on his knee. "I only know that when I see him I see red."

"And small wonder, dearest, small wonder! I know what it all means to you," she sympathized. "Yet you are not one to risk your future for no profit. Why not give up the losing fight—accept the inevitable—and leave the American to enjoy his queen and his crown?"

He was silent—his face set and hard.

"Suppose you do embarrass him before the Council—suppose you even win this play? You cannot hope to win the play which has a throne for the

stake. You cannot set aside the Queen—her title is unimpeachable—and the Queen is the Head of your House, and can remove you utterly from the Succession. So what chance have you for success in the larger sense? A trifling possibility purchased at a life-time of loss."

He smiled, a cold and mirthless smile.

"You put it plainly," he said.

"I put it as it is and as you know it is. It is the fortune of war. I thought you had accepted them, like a philosopher."

"I'm no philosopher!" he interrupted.

"Like a man, then?"

He laughed, a little more mirthfully.

"Like the man you are," she adjected.

"You don't want to go back to Paris alone, little one, do you?"

"I don't want to go anywhere without you," she answered. "I'm selfish, I know, but I'm only a woman, and a woman cares first for the man she loves," and she put her arms around his neck and kissed him lingeringly and with passion.

He smoothed her hair caressingly.

"We will see, sweetheart, we will see," he said. "At least, I promise to go to the Council to-morrow."

XV

THE COUNCIL

"WHAT is the reason for this sudden meeting?" asked General Duval, the War Minister, when the Council were assembling the next morning.

"I do not know," said Admiral Marquard. "As it is called by the King himself and not by Epping, it must be of unusual importance—perhaps Steuben can inform us."

But neither Steuben, nor any of the other ministers, could enlighten them.

A few minutes before the hour, the Prime Minister entered, bowed gravely to his colleagues, and took his seat. He did not bring his dispatch-box with him; which fact was instantly observed by the rest, and while they made no comment, they drew their own inferences from the omission: the King had summoned them, and he would present the business—which, to say the least, was most extraordinary.

As the clock was striking the hour, the door opened and the Duke of Lotzen, in the undress uniform of a Lieutenant-General of Cavalry, entered.

Had the Devil dropped through the ceiling into their midst, the Council would have been scarcely less affected. Count Epping alone was unmoved—possibly because he knew who was expected.

For a moment the Duke paused, just within the threshold, and viewed their surprise with a quiet smile. Then he came slowly down the room, glancing from one to another, until he stood behind the King's chair at the Council table.

"Greeting, messieurs!" he said. "I must admit you are not over-ready in your welcome to a Prince of the Blood—though perhaps my long absence has worked forgetfulness. In which event, let me present myself as his Royal Highness the Duke of Lotzen."

"I fancy it is surprise at seeing your Highness *here*, rather than forgetfulness, that makes them overlook their greeting," said Epping calmly.

"I would infer as much," the Duke sneered.

"More especially," the Count went on, "when we consider the manner of your last appearance and farewell."

"Why refer to an unpleasant subject, monsieur? I have long since forgotten the duel in the library and the burning Book of Laws—so, let it rest."

"We, too, had thought it rested—finally," said the Prime Minister, significantly.

"And so had I, your Excellency, so had I—until you brought it back to mind. Be seated, messieurs!" with a wave of his hand to the other members. "General Duval! Admiral Marquard! Baron Steuben! Marquis de Pasquarde!" bowing to them in turn, and getting a bow back, "I give you greeting."

At that instant, the door swung open behind him and a chamberlain announced:

"The King! gentlemen, the King!"

Armand entered. The Duke bowed stiffly; then he stepped back and stood at attention. The King took his place, at the head of the table, and the Council were seated. Not until then did his Majesty glance toward Lotzen and acknowledge his salute with a formal inclination of the head. But he did not bid him to be seated, which omission was not lost on the latter, though he said no word—but walking to one of the windows he showed his contempt by turning his back and gazing into the court-yard below.

The King noted it, and smiled grimly.

"My lords!" said he, "I have summoned you, the Royal Council of Valeria, that you might hear and judge certain matters which his Royal Highness the Duke of Lotzen has to disclose concerning me. What these matters are, I have no knowledge whatever. During my recent absence from the Kingdom I spent some weeks, incognito, in the City of Washington——"

"The United States!" exclaimed Steuben involuntarily.

"The same," smiled the King. "I went on personal business and my incognito was not revealed. It happened that, on the evening of my arrival there, I encountered in the dining-room of the hotel the Duke of Lotzen with the woman whom you all may recollect—Madeline Spencer. What occurred during the next ten days is not material, except

one thing. Two days before my departure, Count Bigler called upon Mr. Richard Courtney, late Ambassador from the United States to this Court, and desired that he should convey to me a message from the Duke of Lotzen, which message was to this effect: that he, the Duke of Lotzen, purposed to spend the summer in Valeria, either at Ferida Palace or Lotzen Castle as to him seemed fit; and that at any attempt to banish him or to molest him in any way, he would disclose to the Council, and to the House of Nobles, certain matters which have lately come to his notice and which would seriously embarrass her Majesty and myself. At that time, the Duke of Lotzen had already sailed for Europe. I returned three days ago to Dornlitz. Yesterday, I am informed, he arrived in the Capital and proceeded openly to Ferida Palace. I assumed this was in accordance with the threat contained in his message, and I forthwith summoned him to appear before the Council, at ten o'clock this morning, and make good his boast. We are ready now to hear your Royal Highness."

"What if I am not ready to be heard?" the Duke asked, without turning.

"We are not confronted with that situation—yet."

"The situation confronts you, nevertheless, monsieurs," the Duke answered, facing around.

"Are we to understand then that you decline to make any charge?" the King inquired quietly.

Lotzen smiled sarcastically. "On the contrary, I reiterate it afresh."

"What does your Royal Highness reiterate?" inquired Count Epping gravely. "We have heard nothing whatever from you."

"The charge which has been already stated before you," the Duke replied.

"Which is nothing whatever," the Count replied. "His Majesty stated a certain message which he had received, and which purported to come from you. Your conduct is in accord with its tenor, and he therefore has summoned you to deny either or affirm."

"I affirm the message," Lotzen sneered—"as he has repeated it to you."

"The Queen! gentlemen, the Queen!" announced the chamberlain; and Dehra entered the room.

"Be seated, my lords, and continue the business in hand," she said, as she refused the chair Armand vacated and took another that stood a little to one side, acknowledging, at the same time, Lotzen's low bow by the merest inclination of her head.

"The bare affirmation of an indefinite statement is no proof of its truth—as you well know," said Epping. "You have made a vague but serious allegation, which must be supported by evidence if you wish to establish it."

"We are back where we started," the Duke replied. "The specific charge is mine to make when it please me to make it. You know its tenor. Do

you think it well to try to force my hand—do you think I preferred the threat lightly? I should imagine, cousin, you would be very willing that I keep silent."

Epping looked at the King—it was for him to decide. But before he could speak, the Queen broke in.

"Do I understand that the Duke of Lotzen declines to set forth his charge?"

"Until such time as it please me—yes, your Majesty."

"And in the meantime, you propose to remain in Valeria?"

"Such is my intention."

She regarded him with an amused smile.

"Would you try to coerce the Council?" she inquired.

"Not coerce—merely delay."

"Cousin," she said, "either you will make your charge now, or——"

"Or what? That is just what interests me."

"Or you will forthwith be sent under guard across the border, all your property in the Kingdom will be confiscated, and a decree of banishment will be entered against you."

"You would not dare!" he laughed.

"I would not dare?" she inflected. "Try me, if you think it wise."

"A charming sentiment for a woman!" he said.

"In this exigency, I am without sex or per-

sonality," she replied. "I am the Head of the House of Dalberg, whom you are obligated to obey in all things, and whose decrees are your final law—else are you forsworn and a traitor."

For a space, he fingered his sword hilt and looked at her meditatively.

The Council stared and were silent. Never had they heard such plain speech from the Throne.

"And shall I receive judicial treatment, if I prefer my charge now?" he asked.

"Need you ask, sir?" she said.

"And if I substantiate my allegations, by the very Laws of the Dalbergs?"

"You know quite well, you will be sustained."

He bowed. "And if I fail?"

"If you fail, sir," said she quietly, "your punishment will be either what I have already intimated, or else the banishment will be changed to confinement in Lotzen Castle during our pleasure."

"And that pleasure may be?"

"For the rest of your natural life."

"It seems my only recourse is success!" he said, with a sneering laugh.

"It is—we assume you realized it when you came to Dornlitz and reiterated your threat."

"So be it," he replied indifferently. "I only threatened, if I were molested in Valeria, to disclose certain facts which would seriously embarrass the present government. If the American had only been reasonable, it would have been much better for

him. However, if he *will* have it, do not blame me for the results."

"No danger, cousin," said Dehra.

"You have not prejudged?" he asked.

"Since I do not know what you allege, how can I prejudge? Moreover, the Council shall judge, not I."

"I am grateful!" he responded, and bowed again. Then he advanced to the table and took a chair. "I shall have to ask, first, that the Book of Laws be produced in evidence," he said.

"As you wish, sir," she answered, and arose.

The King sprang up, but she stayed him.

"I will get the Book, your Majesty," she said. "It is best that you should not even touch it, except in the presence of the Council."

Presently she returned with a man-servant bearing the brass-bound box.

He placed it on the table and withdrew. The Queen took the key from the small gold case she carried in her hand, unlocked the box, and threw back the lid. The Council arose and stood at attention, while Count Epping lifted out the ancient Book, in which, from time whereof the memory of man ran not to the contrary, the House Laws of the Dalbergs had been recorded.

The damage done by the fire,—into which the Duke of Lotzen had cast it five years before when he and Madeline Spencer were surprised by Dehra and Armand in the King's library—had been

repaired so far as the binding went, but the charred and blackened edges were not in the power of man to restore, and as the Queen passed the Book across to Lotzen, she said:

"If the fire has destroyed what you seek, cousin, you must remember that you have only yourself to blame."

"The fire did not destroy it," replied the Duke. "If it did, I accept the responsibility. I have permission to open the Book?"

"You have permission," she replied.

He opened it well toward the front and turned with quick hand, page by page, until he came, presently, to what he sought. He read it carefully—while the Council watched him in heavy silence. Then, with the light of triumph in his eyes, he looked up.

"The fire did not damage it, your Majesty," he said quietly. "Have I permission to read?"

"Read!" the Queen answered.

"It is a decree of Maximilian the First, dated in 1420, and runs as follows:

"'*It is hereby decreed that every Dalberg who weds outside the Kingdom of Valeria shall produce record proof of the said marriage before his issue will be entitled to inherit. And provided further that no marriage, as aforesaid, shall be proven by presumption alone.*'"

He pushed back the Book and looked blandly at the Queen, and then at Armand.

"You observe the relevancy of this decree—which, I believe, has never been abrogated nor cancelled?" he asked. "Until the marriage of Hugo, Armand's ancestor, is established by some *record* proof, Armand is not entitled to inherit, and, it follows, is ineligible to the Crown. That is my case, your Majesty and my lords."

The Council glanced at one another in amazement—except Epping. He turned to her Majesty for permission to interrogate the Duke—and received it.

"Your Royal Highness is very right," he said. "If the decree be still in effect, his Majesty, as the heir of Hugo, would be ineligible both to the Crown and to Hugo's estates, until or unless record evidence of Hugo's marriage is or has been submitted. That is your position, I apprehend?"

"It is exactly my position. It is for *him* to prove the marriage, not for *me* to disprove it—under the decree cited."

The Count took the Laws, and turned quickly forward.

"Have you considered, in this connection, section one hundred and twenty-five?" he asked. "It is the Decree of Henry the Third, made on the seventh day of September, 1785, which says, *inter alia:*

"' *Whereas, we have learned that our second son, Hugo, hath served with much honour in the American Army under General Washington, and hath, since the termination of hostilities, married into a good family in one of the said American States,*

called Maryland, ... it is further decreed that the marriage of Hugo, and the marriages of his descendants shall be deemed valid and lawful the same as though their respective consorts were of the Blood Royal.' "

He paused, to give the Council time to grasp it.

"Is it not fair therefore to presume that Henry the Third was satisfied with the regularity of Hugo's marriage?" he asked.

"The Decree of Maximilian specifically forbids proof by presumption," the Duke said.

"We are not proving the wedding by presumption—we are simply presuming, from the words of section one hundred and twenty-five, that Henry the Third *had the proof required*, and that he made the decree in accordance therewith. In other words, if he acknowledged Hugo's marriage in 1785, have we the power now to question it?"

The Duke smiled—and reached for the Laws.

"I had thought that Henry's decree would be quoted against me," he replied. "It is the only straw that can be caught—and is about as substantial as a straw. Section one hundred and twenty-five *proves nothing* as to Hugo's marriage. It says: 'Whereas we have *learned* that Hugo. . . . . hath, since the termination of hostilities, married.' Mark you! '*Learned! Learned!*' The vaguest sort of a word!—uncertain! indefinite!—used advisedly, I believe, to show that Henry knows of the marriage

only by rumor. He does not say: 'We have received proof—we have received conclusive evidence' —Oh, no! Oh, no! He says only: 'whereas, we have *learned*.' We have learned! If you can think of a much weaker word to record a *proven* fact, I should like to hear it!"

"How do you interpret the last portion of the decree?" the Count asked: 'It is further decreed that the marriage of Hugo' and so on?"

"As a further support of my reading of the word 'learned,'" Lotzen replied. "Henry says that not Hugo's marriage alone but 'the marriage of his descendants shall be deemed valid and lawful the same as though their respective consort were of the Blood Royal.' It simply waives the bar to marriage *outside* Royalty. It does not waive the specific prohibition of Maximilian's decree requiring *proof* of the marriage. But for Henry's decree, Hugo's descendants would be utterly ineligible to inherit, you must admit." (And the Count bowed his acquiescence.) "And all that his decree does, is to put them in the class with those who marry outside Valeria. It is one of those propositions which are so evident that argument serves only to obscure it."

"The entire question seems to turn upon the construction of the word 'learned,' in Henry's decree," said Count Epping.

"It turns but one way!" the Duke laughed—"toward ineligibility unless the marriage be proven."

"According to your view—yes. And suppose the Council—since her Majesty, who alone has the decision, has deferred to our judgment, being herself an interested party—decides temporarily in your favor, it will simply be interlocutory in effect: That his Majesty must prove the marriage of Hugo, by some record evidence. In the meantime, the *status in quo* to remain—to give him time to produce the proof. If, after a reasonable time, proof be not forthcoming, we will proceed to final judgment. Is that your idea?"

"Precisely!—and it is entirely agreeable to me. Let him take six months to produce his proofs, if need be," he replied, and smiled at Armand. It was for time he was playing.

"Understand, I do not presume to say what the Council will decide," the Count remarked. "You have advanced a novel proposition, and one for which we have no precedent."

"I understand," the Duke replied.

The Prime Minister turned to the King.

"Has your Majesty anything to say in reply to his Royal Highness?" he inquired.

"I should like to ask the Duke of Lotzen a question," said Armand.

The Duke's answer was an indifferent inclination of the head.

"Were you not recently in the United States of America?" said the King.

"I was—and encountered you in the City of Washington," was the mocking answer.

"You did," said the King. Then he addressed the Council. "My lords, you must know that the marriage of Hugo is proven by two contemporary records: Hugo's own Journal and the marriage register of White Marsh Church in Talbot County, Maryland."

"Either of them will be sufficient, cousin!" interrupted the Duke.

"The Journal and the register," Armand went on imperturbably—"were both in existence—the former at Armitage, where Hugo resided, and the latter in the vestry of the church—until one day last month, when two men came to Armitage and, representing themselves as interested in genealogy, obtained the Journal for inspection. They stole it. Then going thence to the church, ostensibly on the same errand, they stole the page containing the official record of the marriage from the register and made way with it, without the knowledge of the rector in charge. It happened a short time thereafter that Mr. Courtney and I paid a flying visit to my old home and discovered, quite by accident, the theft of the Journal. This led also to the detection of the theft from the register." The King paused to give full effect to his words. "The description of the two thieves, my lords, as obtained from both the occupant of Armitage and the rector

of White Marsh, tallies precisely with his Royal Highness the Duke of Lotzen, and Count Edmund Bigler."

"A likely tale! cousin, a likely tale!" the Duke sneered.

"A tale, cousin, which Mr. Courtney will substantiate," the King replied. "It was he who saw through your scheme, and proved that you were the thief."

"No need to tell me that you could not have seen through it, even if it were true—you couldn't see through a plot if it were as transparent as rarefied atmosphere, my dear cousin," was the retort. Then he turned to the Council. "My lords, it is scarcely necessary for me to deny this marvellous tale of the respondent. It is quite too conveniently timed—quite too much of self interest—quite too improbable on its face. I quote a decree—and that decree is before you. He seeks to defend, and to shift the burden, by an oral statement. If you believe him, you accept parol proof of a marriage, which the decree specifically requires shall be proven by record evidence. In other words, if you assumed his fairy tale of the theft to be true, you would still have to accept *his statement* that the record substantiated the marriage—which, I submit, is not permitted. It must be a *record* of the marriage. Mr. Courtney's testimony would no more be evidence that is competent than my dear cousin's."

"Your point is sufficiently plain, I take it," said Count Epping, "but assuming that there were two

contemporary records of the marriage in existence which, let us say, have been *lost* and that they are the only known records, shall his Majesty be debarred from proving their contents by the best evidence obtainable—namely, by parol?"

"I am quite familiar with the law of practice governing the proof of lost instruments," said the Duke, most courteously; "but we are confronted here by a statute of the House of Dalberg, which is unequivocally and absolutely *contra*. General laws of practice cannot over-ride such a case, as you well know. ' Moreover, there may be other record evidence—I am ignorant of the customs in America —which my cousin, doubtless, knows. He may take his time in the search. He may even find Hugo's lost Journal, or the page of the marriage register which, he says, is missing. I am in no especial haste. He forced the disclosure, not I. I was quite willing to defer it until the autumn—maybe indefinitely—if he would permit me to remain unmolested in Valeria. One yearns for his native land, and all that it means, after a prolonged absence, my lords! Therefore am I willing that he should be given time to search for the missing records, or any record that will bring him within the stipulations of Maximilian's decree."

"You to be permitted to remain meanwhile, I suppose?" the Queen cut in.

"Such was my idea, your Majesty," he replied. "The Heir Presumptive would not likely leave the country, at such an exigency."

"By the Heir Presumptive, you mean?" she asked very quietly.

He bowed. "Pending such proof as is required by Maximilian's decree, I take it that Armand is, necessarily, relegated to the status he occupied as an American, without any of the attributes of rank or authority to which, as the heir male of Hugo, he is entitled under Henry's and Ferdinand's decrees."

"And what position does Armand meanwhile occupy as to myself?" she went on, imperturbably. "If he have not royal rank, he would be my morganatic husband, and the Crown Prince would be a morganatic child."

"I can safely leave that question to your own sense of propriety, and your well known impartiality of judgment," he replied, in an exaggeration of respect.

"How nice, cousin!" she mocked. "How exceedingly nice! But you have overlooked the fact, have you not, that I, as Head of our House, can enter a decree supplemental to that of Henry the Great, which will make the ambiguity plain—interpret the word 'learned,' which is the sole support of your position."

"I think, Dehra, that even you would hesitate at interpreting the meaning of a decree made more than a hundred years ago—in the face of the present admitted facts in the matter. The nation might not take kindly to a . . . . morganatic king and his heir apparent."

"I fancy it would take much more kindly to them than to a return of you!" she retorted. "My recollection is that when the nation was *inflicted* with you, as Heir Presumptive, it was more than glad to be rid of you."

"You can try it, if you think so," he sneered.

"No!—I shall not try it," she answered. "There is no occasion to try it. A pleasanter way, and an easier, is to prove Hugo's marriage by a contemporaneous record."

"Certainly!—if you can do that, it will clarify the whole matter!" the Duke laughed.

"If I can do it?" she interrogated. "Do you doubt his Majesty's ability to establish Hugo's marriage? Do you fancy that you have stolen all the record proofs, cousin?"

"I fancy nothing—you are of those who are deluding themselves with a theft of which I am quite innocent," he answered with a shrug.

He was making a losing fight, he saw. That fortune which had sent the American to discover, so opportunely, the theft of the records and had led him to suspect the plot against him, had also enabled him to find another record! And Courtney! the damned meddler! had been the cause of the discovery, and the cause of the defeat. If the time ever came, when he held him in his power——

"It matters not about the delusion, cousin," the Queen was saying. "It is not essential that we should go further into it. It shows, however, to what

length ambition and hate will lead—some people." She turned from him and addressed the Council. "My lords, his Majesty suspected the purpose of the Duke of Lotzen in stealing the records, and, although he knew nothing of Maximilian's decree, he provided himself with another record which the Duke neglected to destroy—because there was no reason to suspect its existence. We obliged him to play his game the moment he arrived in Dornlitz, so as to checkmate him promptly, and to demonstrate that his manners and his methods have not changed from what they were five years ago. We submit this proof to the Council, and ask that it judge whether or not it comes within the provisions of Maximilian's decree."

The King drew a document from the pocket of his uniform and handed it to Count Epping.

The Prime Minister took it, read it, examined with great care the seals, the certificate, the dates; then without comment he passed it on to General Duval, who sat at his right. Duval did the same, and passed it on to Baron Steuben. And so on around the table until it came back to Epping. The latter, with an inclination of the head, proffered it to Lotzen.

"Will you look at it, and tell us what objection, if any, you have to it?" he said.

"By your leave," the Duke answered—and took the paper.

He read it through carefully, very carefully—more carefully even than Epping had done. When

he had finished, he knew that he had lost—lost, once more, to the American! It was fate!—fate! Yet he would play the thing on to the end. And when the decision went against him, take it with a smiling face—and try again. He turned back and examined the seals and the signatures once more.

"I make it," he said slowly, "that this purports to be a copy of a notice—in an Annapolis newspaper of the time—of Hugo Dalberg's marriage to a Miss Chamberlayne. It seems to be duly attested by the State Librarian, who has charge of the original of the newspaper, and further certified by the Governor of Maryland, in the United States—but I do not see how this paper complies with Maximilian's decree. By its very terms, it is specifically stated to be a *copy* of a record—which record *is in existence*. The decree requires 'record proof'—not proof of a *copy* of the record. How is the Council to know whether the signatures of the officials hereto attached are genuine? Signatures and oaths and certificates can be obtained for the asking. My dear cousin says he prepared himself to meet such a contingency—why did he not prepare himself with the *original* of the newspaper, instead of a copy of the notice of the marriage?"

"The State of Maryland would not permit the original to be taken from the library," said Armand.

"Not to settle a question of such moment—the inheritance of a kingdom? Pardon me, if I doubt. It is too incredible—if they were advised for what purpose it was wanted, and by *whom?*"

"Don't you think it would have been a trifle premature, cousin? You had not then sprung your plot, nor even announced your intention of returning to Valeria."

Lotzen shrugged his shoulders. "Always a plot! Always a plot!"

"Moreover, the Council will remember that I did not know of Maximilian's decree. I obtained the attested copy merely by way of precaution. Your propensity for making trouble is well known, cousin."

The Duke smiled sarcastically. "If you had never come to Valeria there would not have been trouble. You are the trouble-breeder, cousin, not I."

He was fighting for time. The decision would go against him, he knew. Better three weeks of Dornlitz than to be banished forthwith. Dehra's eyes were not propitious of mercy, and the set of her mouth was ominous. And three weeks!—much might be accomplished in that time, and, at the end, he would be no worse off than he was at present. He turned to the Council.

"My lords," he said, "if the *Maryland Gazette* be in existence, and contains such a notice as the certificate purports, why does not Armand propose that some of you go to Maryland and inspect it? I have waited in vain to hear it. For my part, I am ready to accept whomever he may name. Surely, I cannot do more to show my good faith!"

It impressed the Council. The expression on their faces showed it—save only Epping. His was inscrutable as ever. But Dehra's mouth relaxed, and she glanced at Armand with an amused smile—which he returned.

Epping turned to the King inquiringly for his decision, but the Queen anticipated him.

"It will not do, cousin," she said. "You cannot remain in Valeria by such a ruse. We will send such members of the Council as you may select, and let them verify the certificate, but *you* will have to depart beyond the border. The writ of confiscation will bide until their report is received, however. By this method, I am aware, you will escape the greater punishment of imprisonment, but I deem the satisfaction of imprisoning you too heavy a price to pay for three weeks of you in Dornlitz. What member of the Council do you suggest, sir?"

For a moment, the Duke did not reply, lest the anger which well nigh choked him should be declared.

"Come, cousin, speak up!" she said, understanding why he was silent.

"I have no choice," he answered curtly.

"Then we will designate Count Epping and Baron Steuben. They will set out to-morrow, and return at the earliest possible moment. Meanwhile, your Royal Highness is given until midnight to depart from Dornlitz, and until noon to-morrow to quit Valeria. My lords, the Council is ended."

XVI

AT THE INN OF THE TWISTED PINES

"I KNOW it was not what we agreed should be done, dear," the Queen said, as they left the Council. "Lotzen was to be discomfited, and then be permitted to remain, but I clean forgot it—or anything, but that I hated his smooth face and suave manner and wanted to be rid of him. And then, when I remembered, it was too late to retract."

"Never mind, sweetheart," the King replied. "It may be the best way—to let him remain had its difficulties too. We'll wait and see. The next move will be his—and we won't anticipate trouble until it come."

"You're such a dear! Armand," she whispered, leaning close. "Here am I upsetting all your plans, and yet you say my way may be the best after all."

"Nonsense!" he answered. "Even if it were the worst way, it is more than compensated for by the look in your eyes. I'd be willing to risk any danger, sweetheart, when you look at me like that," and he bent and kissed her hair.

"I thought you didn't approve of manifestations of affection in public?" she observed.

"No one saw."

"Except Miss De Marcellin!" she laughed, looking toward the steps at the far end of the corridor.

"I have no objections to Hildegarde," he answered, and repeated the kiss.

"Whither away, fair lady?" as Miss De Marcellin approached, looking particularly well in riding dress.

"For a ride, sire—where does one usually go in these togs?" and struck her skirt with her crop.

"And with whom—the Duke, the Marquis, the Count, the Baron—or the American?"

"The Duke, and the Marquis, and the Count, and the Baron—and the American."

"All! you cannot mean it?"

"All ride, when the American rides. He insists upon having all of them accompany us."

"But how does he manage it?" Dehra asked.

"Easily—quite too easily for his own peace of mind!" she smiled. "They are always with us—in his mind."

"The idiot!" the King laughed.

"No—he does it very well, indeed," she answered. "He seems very jealous of them when they are absent, and not at all jealous when they are present. It is a novel proceeding—at least, to me."

"And fairly—fascinating, hey?" he said.

"It is—but don't you be telling him."

"Do you think he does not know it is fascinating?"

"Not from me, silly—so he can't know certainly, unless you babble. Is Armand a babbler, Dehra?"

"I don't know," said Dehra quizzically. "Would you take him for a babbler?"

"On your honor, Hildegarde, on your honor!" cried the King.

"I decline to answer—let the future determine," said she.

"I never blab in one crowd what I hear in another," he protested.

"Then don't blab this!" she retorted, and went down the stairway to the private exit, where Marmont was waiting.

"Who is in the party now?" she said, as they passed the sentry-box at the North gate, and trotted out into the open country.

"I don't understand," Marmont returned.

"Oh yes, you do!" she retorted. "Whom have you along, this time?"

"Whom do you want along?"

"I've accepted the invitation of *one* to ride, but you always lug some of the others along for company."

"I thought you wanted them."

"Why?"

"So you wouldn't be alone with me."

"Why should I be afraid to be alone with you—are you dangerous, Mr. Marmont?"

"Sometimes!"

"And is this one of the times?"

"It depends."

"Upon what?"

"Upon you."

"Goodness, how interesting! You will be peaceful as a baby unless I make you dangerous. Rest assured, I shall not indulge in dangerousness."

"If you can," he replied.

"Certainly, I can."

"Maybe."

"Do you mean to imply—anything?"

"Nothing—by implication. It is a self-evident fact to me."

"I admit, I do not follow—the argument is too close for my feeble brain."

"I suppose so!"

"Because it is too close for yours also?"

"Because you do not need to *follow*. You are yourself the guide."

"Again I plead my want of understanding."

"We shall see how far your understanding is defective!" he laughed.

"Oh, very well!" she retorted.

"But, returning to the original matter under discussion, if you are not afraid of me—if you accepted the invitation of *one* (myself) to ride, and really don't want the others lugged along for company, why—they shall not be lugged. It shall be just 'you and I together, love'——"

"You are becoming impertinent, sir," she interrupted. "Either you must stop it, or the others will *have* to be lugged along—at least, one of them."

"Have you any preference?"

"No—the Duke is very clever—and the Marquis very amusing—and the Baron very proper—you may take your choice."

"I take it, the proper one is the best," he said.

"Because you don't trust me?" she inquired, with an amused smile.

He shook his head.

"And if I avoid being impertinent, need even the Baron go?"

"I think I should rather they did—not go," she answered and raced away.

Presently she drew down to a walk and waited for him to come up. He had appreciated that it would be a false move to overtake her: A woman likes to choose her own time to be caught—and not to be outridden.

"Let us go to the Inn of the Twisted Pines," she said. "It's only about ten miles out—I was there the other day, and it is lovely—and such cooking!"

"Who was in the party?" he asked.

She gave him a quick glance. "The Duke de Nevier, and some others. The Duke is the one you were curious about."

"Not at all! I don't care a rap about the Duke."

"The Marquis de Chamford then."

"Nor the Marquis."

"The Count de Fer, possibly."

"Nor the Count de Fer—nor any of the chaps with titles or without titles."

"Indeed!" she mocked.

"Just so. If plain Marmont, an American of good family as families go there, with a reasonably large income, hasn't a little more than an even chance to win an American girl, by being just what he is or tries to be—an American gentleman—he is vastly deceived in the particular girl."

"Say that again," she smiled. "It is so involved, I had forgot the beginning long before you ended."

"I can't. I've forgot it myself," he replied. "But what I meant is, if you're a sensible girl you will marry me."

"Modest you. And if I'm a foolish girl, I will marry a title?"

"Precisely."

"All girls are naturally foolish."

"When they're young," he appended. "When they have reached the age of discretion, it is an open question."

"And have I, in your opinion, reached the age of discretion?"

"Just about,—they reach it at twenty."

"You're starting well!" she laughed.

"It's the ending that bothers me," he said, a little seriously.

"I should say you promise—very well," she replied, edging away.

"Why shouldn't this be the ending?" he demanded.

"Because you've only started."

"I've been started for a month," he protested.

"A month! Is it so long?"

"It doesn't seem so, does it?" avoiding the trap she laid for him.

She smiled encouragingly. "You are improving!"

"You're a dear," he answered.

"Going some! monsieur! going some!"

"If I have only started, I want to cover the necessary distance in record time."

"There is danger!" she warned.

"Of what?"

"Of coming a cropper."

"It depends on the going?"

"And that depends on——"

"You!" he cut in.

"The inference is reasonably plain!" she laughed.

"It was intended to be."

"There will be no croppers, if you do not presume."

"I shall not presume."

"Nor become impertinent?"

"I shall not become impertinent."

"Nor——" she paused.

"I shall not become nor——" he promised.

"Now, you are becoming foolish."

"You left me little else to become," he replied.

"Why become anything—why not be what you are?"

"Speaking of riddles! I might be a pirate."

"You might be, but you're not—we don't have pirates these days. It is not dignified. We have, instead, Wall Street and the Trusts."

"The pirate of old took what he wanted," he observed.

"And the pirate of to-day takes more than he wants, or ever can use."

"What have pirates, either of old or of to-day, got to do with the subject under discussion?" he asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea!" she laughed. "You introduced them—you ought to know."

"I merely used a pirate for comparison. I might quite as well have said a polar bear or a catamaran."

"Not if you wish me to think you sane or sober," she retorted.

"It's a bit vague what you think me," he said.

"It may be a bit vague what you are."

"Then why should you tell me not to become anything, but to be what I am?"

"That isn't difficult to comprehend. You're very nice and particularly attractive, so don't spoil it by becoming anything."

"Except more so."

"Which is being, not becoming. I like you very well, as you are, Mr. Marmont," with a sidelong glance through her long lashes, and raced away again.

"There!" she said, after a while, pointing with her crop, "is the Inn of the Twisted Pines. At least two hundred and fifty years old, it is to-day just as it was originally built. See the logs, and the gables, and the windows, and the courtyard with the high wall on all four sides. It's dear."

"And you say the cooking and the wines are excellent?"

"It is the good, plain cooking of the long ago—such as our forefathers liked."

"I can't understand why the Inn has been left—why it has escaped the hand of the improver—why a big modern hotel isn't here, with a huge bill-of-fare and nothing to eat."

"Just what I asked the Duke de Nevier, and he says the old landlord holds under a perpetual lease granted to his ancestors by Henry the Great—he won't sell, and all the ground around is Crown land. He turns a deaf ear to every proposition to sell. He says that what was good enough for the Great King to lease, and for his ancestors to hold, is good enough for him to keep."

"Quite a curiosity," Marmont commented.

"Quite refreshing, I should say," she returned.

"Quite unusual, we will both agree!" he laughed.

The old Boniface was at the steps to greet them. He was not prepossessing. His natural ugliness was augmented by scars. His countenance, as some one had expressed it, suggested the old Spanish

proverb that the Lord had made him as ugly as He could and then hit him in the face. However, what he lacked in looks he more than made up in courteousness, and as he bowed his two guests into the Inn, he could not have been surpassed in manner and aplomb by any head waiter Marmont had ever seen—and Marmont had some experience with head waiters the world over.

Marmont lifted Miss De Marcellin down slowly; whereat, she smiled, but made no comment.

"Take the horses around to the shade in the rear of the house," he said to the groom who had accompanied them.

"You're very thoughtful," she remarked—"of horses."

"Which promises well, doesn't it?"

"For the horses? Yes."

"Certainly for the horses!" he laughed. "What else could I have meant?"

She gave him an amused look. "I'm sure I can't imagine. Here is the big room! See the huge fireplace, and the great beam rafters, chocolate colored with age and smoke, and the old casement windows with their wide seats. Isn't it fascinating?"

"It is," said he, looking at her. "Perfectly fascinating—the most fascinating I ever expect to see."

"I am not talking about myself, stupid!" she replied. "Of course, I'm fascinating—the most fascinating woman you have ever met. You would

be very derelict, indeed, not to think so—or, at least, say so. I'm discussing the Inn, and this room, in particular."

"I'll agree with anything you say!" he laughed. "But seriously——"

"Then you were not serious before?"

He made a gesture of resignation. "It's no use. I'm no match for you——"

"It is the first time you have thought it," she returned. "You've always left me under the impression that you considered yourself my particular affinity — made-for-each-other-before-the-world-began sort."

"You little flirt!" he exclaimed. "I've a great notion to——"

"You forget the landlord," she interrupted.

"The landlord won't be here all the time."

"That will depend entirely on how you promise to behave, Mr. Marmont," she said, seating herself on a low settle directly across the room from the door, where she was distinctly visible from the hall.

Marmont sat down on a nearby chair. The innkeeper hovered around within call, but apparently without noticing them.

"You've been here—won't you order?" he said.

She shook her head. "Anything will do—with a cold drink."

"We'll leave it to the landlord, he will know the Inn's specialties."

He raised his hand and the old man instantly

responded—at which Marmont and Miss De Marcellin laughed.

"You see?" she remarked.

"He sees," he answered—and directed him to prepare luncheon. "You may select it," he said. "Meanwhile, let us have a bottle of your best Tokay."

"Monsieur shall be served at once," was the answer.

"Tokay is rather an unusual wine, isn't it?" she asked.

"To us Americans. It is the famous wine of Valeria, however, and I have heard the King mention this very Inn as having an especially ancient vintage which is very fine."

"I don't even know what color it is."

"Red—like the dark carmine on a two cent postage stamp. Ah! here it is. Is it of the vintage that the King prefers?" he asked.

"His Majesty has been graciously pleased to express his approval of it," the landlord replied, holding up a cobwebbed bottle. "Is my lord satisfied—yes?" He drew the cork, and, in response to a nod from Marmont, filled the glasses. "Every drop is a jewel, my lord," he said, as the liquor gurgled slowly forth. "Every drop is a ruby, see!"

"Will you drink rubies with me, Miss De Marcellin?" Marmont asked.

"I will drink anything! I'm nearly perished."

Then she looked at him banteringly. "Why not?" she asked. "Why shouldn't I drink—rubies with you? Rubies are my favorite jewels."

"You won't wear them for me," he said.

"I can't recall that you ever gave me the opportunity," she smiled—— "And the landlord is still in the room, sir."

"He doesn't count."

"He counts *one* to me. Moreover," she lifted her glass, "I'm thirsty—so——!"

He touched glasses. "To another ride here with you—and the absence of the landlord!"

"To many more rides here with you—and someone always in attendance in the room," she added.

A clatter of hoofs in the courtyard attracted them. Marmont glanced through the window. A man in riding dress was just dismounting.

"I know that chap," he said. "Moore pointed him out to me the other day. He is the name of a hotel—the—the—the—Oh, yes! the Ritz—Baron Ritz—or Retz. He used to be Minister of Justice —until the King fired him for grafting. They have grafting in Valeria, it seems, as well as in America. Grafting appears to be the oldest thing under the sun. I reckon you can spare the landlord a minute now—he is out in the courtyard. Have some rubies?"

"Oh, dear—I suppose the Baron is coming in here," she said as he refilled her glass.

"Don't you want him?"

"The landlord was sufficient protection," she answered.

"I'll see what I can do!" he laughed, striding toward the door, which the landlord had closed behind him—just as Retz's footsteps sounded in the hall. They went on by the door and continued to the floor above.

"There is something suspicious about this," Marmount reflected, as he thought of Moore's tale, and its possible significance of future happenings. "Why should Retz come here alone at this hour, when the Inn is presumably deserted, and go directly up-stairs?"

He returned to the settle and sat down. Miss De Marcellin eyed him a bit uncertainly—the landlord had not returned.

"I'll share a secret with you—but you mustn't babble," he said.

"If you think I'm a babbler, do not tell me," she replied.

"Don't be so literal," he observed. "If I had thought you would babble, I would not have mentioned it."

"Which is a trifle contradictory!" she remarked.

"Perhaps it is—but you know what I mean."

"Now for the secret!" she replied, leaning close.

"The landlord isn't in the room," he cautioned.

"One is impersonal when telling secrets. I'm not

nervous—see?" and she smiled up at him, and put out her hand.

He bent and kissed her fingers, then released them.

"It may be nothing, and yet it may be something of material moment. This Baron Retz hates the King—he is secretly an adherent of the Duke of Lotzen. The Duke is in Dornlitz, I understand. Is Retz here to meet the Duke or some one from him? It looks that way."

"Let us wait and see," she suggested. The idea of detecting a rendezvous that was inimical to Armand instantly appealed to her.

Marmont nodded. "It can't be a very long wait. If he is to meet some one, it is by appointment, and Retz wouldn't arrive much in advance of the time."

"How do you know that Retz is to arrive first?" she asked. "Maybe the other fellow came before we did."

"Very true! And how do we know that there is but one other fellow?" he laughed. "Your advice is the best—to wait and see."

"What can they be plotting against Armand?" she demanded.

"Anything—from dethroning him to forcing him to grant something Lotzen wants. We will report the rendezvous, if there is one, and Armand can handle it as he sees fit."

A maid entered with the luncheon—placed it on the table in the window at Marmont's direction, and

at a nod from him withdrew. The landlord bustled in, asked if everything was to their pleasure, and, being assured that it was, was about to retire when Marmont slipped something into his hand.

"We are not to be disturbed, and no one is to know that we are here," he said.

"You may depend on me, my lord," was the answer, and he withdrew.

A moment later, they heard the noise of a rapidly approaching horse.

"He comes!" cried Miss De Marcellin.

"Keep back from the window," Marmont cautioned, as a big bay galloped into the courtyard.

"Bigler!" exclaimed Marmont. "Bigler! by all that's holy!"

"Who is Bigler?" asked she.

"'Lotzen's Jackal,' the King calls him."

"Then it *is* a rendezvous?"

"It is, indeed," he answered.

Bigler tossed his reins to a servant and came quickly up the steps. The landlord received him in the doorway with a low bow.

"Welcome! my lord, welcome! It is five years, at least, since you have honored my poor house."

"Has it been so long, Scartman?" Bigler responded. "Has the Baron Retz arrived?"

"And waiting you upstairs. I'll conduct your worship."

"I'll conduct myself, thank you. Which room—

the one on the right of the landing?" Then noticing that the door of the big room was shut, he stopped. "Who is in here?" he demanded.

"No one! my lord, no one!" was the glib answer. "It is being cleaned and put in order for this evening. A big party from the garrison, sir, a big party from the garrison."

"A clever rogue, old spoiled-face!" Marmont laughed, when Bigler's steps sounded on the stairs. "And a ready liar. He thinks we only want to be undisturbed—like many of those, I fancy, who come to this Inn."

"Which of course we do not," she replied.

"No! of course not," he agreed.

"Do we really agree on something?" she asked.

"It would seem so?"

"Language is susceptible of various meanings!" she reflected.

He smiled. "A quiet luncheon *à deux* is very pleasant."

"And not to have it interrupted by others is still pleasanter."

"Even by the landlord?"

"The landlord doesn't count."

"Why this change of attitude?" he asked.

"I have not changed, stupid. He counts to keep you in order, but he doesn't count *à deux*—understand?"

"A very neat distinction!"

"I thought you would like it."

"I didn't say I liked it."

"Don't you like it, Mr. Marmont?"

"A dissenting opinion is of no avail."

"You can file it, however—and, when the Court changes its complexion or its view, it may adopt your opinion."

He looked at her in surprise.

"Oh! don't be startled," she replied. "I read law with my father—for diversion. These cutlets are delicious. Yes, thank you, I'll have another. No! no more wine—I've had rubies enough, for this time in the day."

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

They were just finishing their luncheon, an hour or so later, when steps were heard on the stairs, and Retz was bowed out by the inn-keeper, mounted his horse and rode away without a word.

"Where is Count Bigler?" asked Miss De Marcellin.

"He will be along presently. They don't want to risk being seen leaving together."

"Shall we wait until he goes?" pulling on her gauntlets.

"I think it would be just as well—at least, a short time. You are not in haste to return?"

She shook her head, and went over to a mirror hanging in the far corner.

He sat on the arm of a chair, and watched her with a satisfied smile. . . . The trim figure in the

tan-colored skirt and jacket—the patent-leather boots—the cocked hat—the air of a princess, with the ease and freedom of the American girl—and the sweetest, fairest, loveliest face that he had ever seen. She was not in love with him yet, he knew, but he had hopes—very great hopes. He was not afraid of the nobility—she was too sensible a girl to go after a title, after a foreigner, when she could pick and choose among her own sort and kind. She might play them off against him, but he would rather have his chances than theirs.

There are two general methods of winning a woman—leaving out the door-mat variety of devotion. One is to pique her pride and arouse her by affecting indifference. The other is for the man to assume she is going to marry him, tell her so frequently, and be unconcerned at her attempts to arouse his jealousy. The former is more hazardous, because he must act at the psychological moment and catch her on the fly, so to speak, but it has the merit, perhaps, of being quicker in results, if successful. The latter is generally the surer method, though he runs the risk of her making a most complete fool of him, if he fails—and of being dismissed with ridicule, or, at least, without even a pretense of regret. There are other methods, of course, depending on the particular woman in the case, but they are only refinements of the foregoing.

Marmont, when he had made up his mind that

he wanted Miss De Marcellin, had adopted the latter method, and things were turning for him very much as he had anticipated. He had had some jolts, it is true—very many of them, indeed—but he saw no reason to be dissatisfied, nor to lose hope of ultimate success.

He was still smiling, when she turned from the window and came toward him.

"You appear to be pleased with something," she remarked.

"With somebody," he corrected.

"With me, Mr. Marmont! Oh! thank you! As the tradesman says: 'I aim to please.'"

"You find the clout with me, I can assure you."

"The clout?"

"Archery term for bull's eye."

"I appreciate the change of term, Mr. Marmont."

"Thank you!"

She came over close, and gave him a saucy stare.

"Do you know, you are very conceited!" she laughed.

"I confess it."

"You confess it?"

"Certainly! In the first place, I don't dare contradict you; in the second place, if I were not conceited, I wouldn't venture to assume that you're going to marry me. You catch the idea?"

"I caught the idea some weeks ago, Mr. Mar-

mont. It is not new with you, you know—nor with the Duke, nor the Marquis, nor any of the others."

"I didn't expect it to be—more's the pity."

"But you play it so much better than the rest; with so much more ease and assurance. You must have had much, very much experience?"

"It requires an *experienced* critic to appreciate it."

"Oh, I've had a bit of experience," she said lightly.

"And I've had some experience, of a sort—but never *this* sort," he replied.

"You look more than—twenty!" she meditated.

He tapped the gray hair at his temples. "You are remarkably discerning, mademoiselle. It even may be that you have discerned something else."

"Concerning whom—yourself?"

He bowed.

"It is well, sometimes, not to discern. No! No! Mr. Marmont!" she laughed. "I'm not going to ask you what the 'something else' is."

"Since you know, it is not necessary to tell you," he replied.

"I know it is something terribly indiscreet—and which the occasion does not warrant, therefore, I forbid it."

She was standing close, watching him with a merry glance. Suddenly he reached out and took her hands.

"Give me a kiss, dear one," he said.

"If you wish it, sir," she answered instantly.

He was startled—so startled, indeed, he did not believe his ears. That she should quietly accede was incredible. He looked at her doubtfully—and saw that in her eyes which made him hesitate to venture.

"I don't know whether you mean it?" he said uncertainly.

"You will have to be the judge," she answered.

He dropped her hands.

"I'm afraid," he said. "I'm afraid of the consequences, if you don't mean it. Tell me, Hildegarde, did you mean it, dear, did you mean it?"

She gave a little laugh, and stepped back out of reach.

"I did *not* mean it!" she replied.

"I fear so," he said.

"But, maybe, I mean it——"

A tremendous clatter on the stairs drowned the rest of her words—as Marmont sprang forward. She stayed him by a motion.

"What was it?" she whispered.

"Damn, your old stairs, Scartman!" came Bigler's voice, just outside the door. "If I had hurt myself, I'd have broken every bone in your infernal body. Why the devil don't you fix them, man?"

"I'm very sorry, my lord, very sorry. The nails are long and——"

"And they've been long for years. I saved myself from falling only by a lucky catch. As it is, I've cut my boots clean through with my spurs."

"I'm very sorry, my lord, very sorry!" the innkeeper repeated.

"This spur is pulled clear off the heel—fix it, man! That's right. Now the other one! I'll take a look at the old room, Scartman," and he flung the door open, and stepped in——

"Oh! Oh! I ought to have known it. A rendezvous! I apologize for falling down these crazy stairs, and startling you so rudely." His eyes were growing used to the dimmer light in the room. "By Heaven! the King's cousin, and the King's guest!"

"And you are Count Bigler, I believe," said Marmont significantly,—"and your companion was Baron Retz. Why didn't you come together—and why are you leaving separately?"

Bigler glowered at them for an instant, then he laughed mockingly.

"Better find the answer for—'why you two are here,'" he said, and went out.

XVII

ON THE TERRACE

I DID not see the King until late that evening—he was dining at the French Ambassador's—but the Queen and he stopped in our apartment on their return. Helen bore Dehra off to her boudoir for a private chat, and Armand, flinging off his sword, settled himself in an easy chair and lit a cigarette.

"I wish you had been at the Council, this morning," he said. "You would have seen her Majesty in a Dalberg humor—a genuine Dalberg humor—and you have some idea what that is—having seen me."

"Her Majesty could never be so headstrong nor impatient of restraint as——"

"I am," he ended. "Possibly you're right. At any rate she put a large sized crimp in our scheme anent Lotzen—and never thought what she was doing until too late."

"You had Lotzen before you?" I asked.

"Yes!" he laughed. "We had cousin Lotzen before us, and he was promptly given until midnight to quit Dornlitz, and until noon to-morrow to get himself beyond the border."

"Quick work," I commented.

He nodded; and described the episode.

"We were mistaken," said I. "You are not to

have the Duke at close range—we must watch him from a distance."

"It is unfortunate in our view of it, but not in Epping's—he was dead against it. Keep him away, the farther the better, is his idea."

"Well, his way is the only way now," said I. "And the Count is older than either of us, and presumably knows the game better than we. It is good-bye to your idea of making Lotzen pay the penalty of his plots, but it is conservatory of your life. Moreover, you might have lost, you know."

"Yes, I might; but I would rather have Lotzen shoulder the responsibility in person. And he intended to try—Bigler met Retz, this afternoon, at the Inn of the Twisted Pines. They were in conference, in a room on the second floor, for an hour."

"You think the conference was arranged before the Council meeting?" I asked.

"I'm sure of it. Marmont and Miss De Marcellin rode out to the Inn for luncheon; Retz and Bigler came shortly after they had arrived."

"And saw them there?"

He smiled. "Bigler saw them—after Retz had departed. . . . ."

"Marmont would have been in trouble had Bigler been disposed to be ugly," I observed, when he had recounted the incident.

"I told him as much, but he said he didn't fear—if it had come to a pinch he would have put a bullet through him."

"A peaceful American!" I commented.

"They all seem to get it in Valeria. You and I were the same way. It must be in the air, Dick. We were gentle, before we came here."

"We are gentle still," said I, "except where Lotzen is concerned. It is he who makes us want to kill and slay—even the Queen is not exempt from the baneful influence."

"She has done her best to be rid of him," he remarked.

"I trust it will be successful—but I doubt it."

"You think he will try once more?"

"Isn't the Retz conference significant?" I asked.

"Significant, now that he is banished?"

"Is banishment likely to make him any less vindictive?"

"You would assume not—but what one assumes, as the reasonable inference, Lotzen always negatives by doing the contrary."

"The longer I reflect, the more I'm convinced that hate and revenge and fancied injury will drive him on. The Queen has threatened to confiscate his property. He knows it is only a question of a few weeks until the writ issues. He will resist by such means as are available and try to force an agreement that will save his estates. You have deprived him of power but left him his fortune. Now he faces the loss of it also—the inevitable loss, unless something intervenes—unless he holds a forcing card. What would be your play, were you in a similar case?"

"I cannot imagine," he replied.

"And remember, too—what Lotzen doubtless realizes—that it is easier for you not to confiscate his estates than to restore them to him once they have been forfeited."

"You look for him to move, within the next few weeks?" he asked.

"I do—though, as you say, no man can foresee what Lotzen will do. I think, however, it will be a move sharp and a sudden. You know exactly the status, politically, among the nobility, and should be able to guess nearer than anyone what you have to confront. Lotzen, you may be sure, knows it also. He has kept himself advised of the situation—and he knows his friends, which possibly you do not."

"What king ever knew his rival's friends?" Armand smiled.

I nodded. "To my mind, his first care will be for his estates. Your life will bide until after they are saved. Of course, if he can save his estates, and at the same time get your life, it would not occasion him any great distress of mind."

"And if he should lose his life in the attempt to save his estates, it will not occasion me any great distress of mind," the King answered.

"I assume not," I smiled. "Is there any State secret which he knows and can hold over the Government in event of confiscation?"

"There are State secrets, of course, which we should be loath to have disclosed, yet I fancy even

their betrayal would not deter Dehra. Her Majesty seems to have made up her mind, and I'm not inclined to persuade her otherwise. We have been very lenient with our dear cousin, up to this time. Now he will get only what is rightfully coming to him—and the quicker he gets it the better. You may be sure that Retz will be very circumspect when he learns that he was seen with Bigler at the Inn, and that I am aware of the meeting. I shouldn't be surprised if he even asked for an audience to assure me of the harmlessness of the conference. And it may have been harmless—but it is open to grave doubt. As one of the old nobility, he has the *entrée,* and I'll bet you a box of cigarettes that he musters up his courage sufficiently to broach the matter to me, if I give him an opportunity."

And the King was not mistaken. At the ball, the following night, I saw Retz, debonair, suave, mild as the May night itself, among the press of nobility who thronged the great chamber where their Majesties walked through the opening minuet.

Presently, he came up to Mrs. Courtney and myself and made his greetings. I had no reason to show I disliked him—he had always been clever and courteous to me while I was Ambassador, so we chatted perfunctorily. I noticed, however, his eyes were watching the King, and when he passed on, it was toward his Majesty.

Armand saw him coming, and shot me a look of

comprehension. Then Helen wanted me to dance, and, when we had finished, and I had turned her over to a younger partner—I am a bit old for dancing even with my wife—I was called by Miss De Marcellin, who forsook the Duke and the Marquis and half a score of others, and borne away to the terrace.

"My dear young lady!" I said, "this is very complimentary to my gray hairs, but what is the reason that animates you?"

"Do I have to give a reason?" she asked demurely.

"Not unless you wish—and it will relieve your mind."

"Well, the reason is that you're quite the nicest man I've seen to-night."

"And safe," I added.

"Exactly—you don't make love to me on every occasion and at every opportunity."

"God forbid!" I ejaculated. "There would be trouble in the family, sure enough."

She laughed.

"Do they all make love to you?" I asked.

She nodded. "And they do it abominably. They expect me to pretend I believe everything they say, and they get offended when I chaff them."

"By 'they,' you mean?"

"The nobility—the Valerians—the titles."

"You don't include the—Americans?"

"I most assuredly do not!" she answered emphatically. "The Americans are the——"

"Where is Marmont?" I inquired innocently.

"Drinking highballs or lost in the crowd, I reckon. I haven't seen him for an hour."

"Maybe we can find him?" I suggested.

"Maybe we can—presently!" she laughed. "Is it safe for you to be out here alone with me?"

"That depends on how well developed my power of resistance is."

"You don't know what it is?"

"Not until I've tried it—or been tried."

"Maybe it is not safe for me?" she suggested.

"One never can tell."

"However, I'll risk it—with you."

"And meanwhile we will keep an eye out for Marmont."

"If he should chance to pass—unengaged—we might consider whether it would be proper to call him."

"It shall be for you to say—whether you want him or whether you do not. I'm very well satisfied, I assure you," as I settled back in the shadow.

"Quite reminds you of old times—about five years ago," she smiled.

"What do you know of five years ago?" I asked.

"I know enough—to be sure that you would not have missed this terrace. Armand didn't miss it. Wasn't it here that he made his peace with Dehra for that cousinly salute he gave her at their first meeting?"

"I think it was—at this very place, indeed."

"Dehra is a perfect dear!" she exclaimed. "She

is exactly as I pictured a queen should be, who is absolutely perfect."

"She is all that—and then some," I appended.

"I love her."

"We all love her. Had you seen her as I have seen her—in trouble, in danger, in distress, in perplexity, in sorrow, in joy, you would think her the most marvellous woman that ever lived."

"Who is the most marvellous woman that ever lived, Dick?" asked a soft voice behind me—and the Queen, with Marmont, rounded the embrasure in which we were sitting.

"Your Majesty!" said I, bowing.

"A courtier's answer!" she laughed, "but we will have none of that when we're with you, Dick—and there is no occasion for ceremony. Whom did you mean—Helen?"

"The courtier's answer happens to be the true answer," I replied. "I was speaking of you."

"You flatterer!" she exclaimed, while a faint blush overspread her cheek. "What would Helen say, sir, what would Helen say?"

"She would say the same—she has often said it," I responded, and bowing low again I kissed her hand.

She gave me her adorable smile and pressed my fingers.

"Mr. Courtney spoils me," she said. "Having been with Armand and me through some little trouble, five years ago, he persists in giving me too

much credit for the trifling part I bore in it—when our success was, in truth, due to his own level head and Armand's sword. And lest he persist again, I'm going to take him away with me and leave Mr. Marmont in his place. You will yield Mr. Courtney to me, Hildegarde? "

"I will yield anything to the wonderful Dehra," said Hildegarde.

I offered the Queen my arm, and we went down the terrace.

"Another of your thoughtful actions," said I.

"For whom? " she laughed.

"For all three."

"Why not the fourth also? You're next to Armand with me, Dick, you know."

"And after Helen, there is no one but you," I answered.

"We understand each other—and just what that means," she said. "Moreover, however much Mr. Marmont may be flattered by being the Queen's escort, I appreciate that he prefers to be with Miss De Marcellin. To a man in love, there is but *one* queen, Dick."

"At least, there is but one queen—at a time! " I laughed.

"And while that one is always his sweetheart, she is not always his wife."

"In two instances, she is both—as you well know," I answered.

"And further does not concern us! " she laughed.

"Let us sit here a moment, before I go back to being a queen again," as we passed a sheltered spot. "Do you know, Dick, I'm horribly worried over Lotzen."

"Don't worry over him," said I. "He isn't worth it."

"I should not have let him go."

"You think you should have followed Armand's plan? It might have been better."

"To let him stay in Valeria?"

"Yes."

"Not precisely," said she. "My regret is that I didn't let him remain in Valeria—in prison."

"Would it have been wise?"

"To imprison a rival? He is not my rival for the Crown. He is Armand's rival; and it would be I, not Armand, who, as the Head of the Dalbergs, issued the order. Now, I've let him go, and trouble will come of it—and quickly."

"What trouble?" I asked.

"If I knew, there would be no trouble. Oh, you may laugh at me! with your masculine temperament, you may laugh at me! but my woman's intuition warns me—and it has never yet failed."

Which was true. Her intuition was marvellous. I had never known it to be at fault. And in the stormy times of five years ago, had we let it guide us, we would have solved the riddle of the disappearance of the Book of Laws, and of the real culprit, much sooner than we did—and Dehra would not have had to face the dangers that she hazarded.

"Have you told Armand of this fear?" I asked.

"No—but it has been oppressing me to-night, and I shall tell him later."

"Tell him," said I. "He has faith in your intuition."

"Dick!" she said, laying her beautiful hand on my arm, "there is to be one more fight with cousin Lotzen—one more fight, and the last. I feel it—I know it! Then we shall have peace from his plottings, and from him. Yet if only I knew that Armand would come through it safely—that he would be preserved for Valeria, and for me. But as to that, my intuition tells me nothing. And I am afraid, Dick, afraid—oh! so afraid!"

She spoke calmly—with the calm of conviction, and the air of one who states a fact. There was no terror, nor even fear in her voice—only assurance and unimpassioned narration.

"I'm glad, Dick, that you are to be here in this crisis—to be in at the death, so to speak."

"So am I," I answered. "And if there is to be any death, you may be sure Armand won't do the dying."

"If I only could be sure of it," she said.

"*Be* sure of it," said I. "Drive the facts to suit your will."

"It will relieve me while I'm driving," she smiled.

"And it may have some effect. We do not know the power of the absent mind on the doings of another. Here comes Armand and—Helen!"

"Caught!" laughed the King. "Off on the terrace with Mr. Courtney, are you? Shall we deign to stop, Mrs. Courtney?"

"Pray don't," the Queen returned.

"She doesn't mean it," Helen assured him. "She's dreadfully jealous of me, sire."

"Come and sit down," Dehra invited, taking Helen's hand.

"Let *us* beat it," said Armand, addressing Dehra.

"You mean, let their Majesties retire? With pleasure! Lead on, Courtneys—we follow."

As we passed Miss De Marcellin and Marmont, the King saw them and called out:

"A dangerous place, Hildegarde—watch him closely, my dear, watch him very closely!"

"I'm doing my best, cousin Armand!" she laughed; "but I think he is beyond temptation."

"Just what did you mean?" asked Marmont, when we had gone on.

"I was replying to the King's remark," Hildegarde replied.

"Which, being interpreted, means that you were not speaking to me."

"Precisely!"

"But you were speaking *of* me."

"To be sure! how marvellously your powers of comprehension are developed," she retorted.

"They need to be."

"To keep up with me? Am I so obscure?"

"When you want to be."

"You're fond, then, of obscurity?"

"Not especially. I accept it—with its pleasures. I'm not making this running, you know. I'm only trying to keep up with the race and to distance my competitors."

"An entirely laudable object," she remarked.

"I'm delighted to have you say so."

"And at which, I must admit, you are fairly successful—very successful, indeed."

"I haven't noticed it myself."

"You're not sufficiently observing."

"I would rather *you* observe it than that I should assume it—unwarrantedly."

"That is exactly as it should be," she commented. "It shows the proper spirit."

"A humble and a contrite heart, O Hildegarde, thou wilt not despise!"

"A humble and a contrite heart is a particularly convenient thing to have!" she laughed.

"Also a particularly rare thing to have," he replied.

"Granted," she said. "I don't presume *you* have it?"

"Only with you, dear."

She raised her eyebrows. "You are not exhibiting it at present."

"Wherein am I at fault?" he asked penitently.

"In presuming to call me 'dear.'"

"Nothing ventured nothing stolen."

"You would steal me?"

"I would. The rape of the Sabines appeals to me very strongly."

"We are not in Rome—and you are not a Romulus."

"I wonder if Romulus was as good looking a chap as I am?"

"Never having seen Romulus, nor any authentic portrait of him, I cannot say—but I should imagine——"

"When are you going to give me that kiss?" he asked suddenly.

For a moment she was speechless—he had positively taken her breath.

"We were discussing Romulus and you—not kisses," she answered—choking back the laughter.

"Oh! that was at least a decade ago," he replied.

"And what have you been doing all the decade?"

"Looking at you, and waiting."

"Then you won't object to waiting a little longer."

"Since waiting 'a little longer' implies ultimate success, I won't object!" he laughed.

"I'm beginning to be affected with your confidence," she returned. "If you persist at every opportunity in telling me I'm going to kiss you, I shall end by doing it, I fear."

"Just so!—and if I persist in telling you that you're going to marry me, you'll end by marrying me."

"If nothing intervenes!" she scoffed.

"It shall be my care that nothing intervenes," he said confidently.

"The Duke and the Marquis and——"

"All the other pedigreed duffers, notwithstanding," he interrupted. "If you don't interpose anything more effective than the Duke et ceteri, it will be easy."

"I wish I had such assurance."

"Cultivate it—it's not difficult to acquire."

"Possibly not—if one has the requisite self conceit," she smiled.

He did not make the obvious answer to which she tempted him.

"If you had any self conceit, I would not want to marry you!" he replied.

"That was very nicely said," she answered, after a brief pause.

"I meant it."

"Yes!" after another pause. "Yes, I think you did mean it. Isn't that enough for me to admit in one evening, sir?"

"It isn't enough, but it is something—until you admit the material fact."

"That I love you?"

"That you love me."

"And must it be a *fact?*"

"It is a fact—I'm simply waiting for you to admit it."

"Self confidence again."

"When will you admit it, Hildegarde?"

"Miss De Marcellin, please."

"When will you admit it, Miss De Marcellin?"

"When it is a fact—when you have done some brave act—and when you ask me."

"When I have done some brave act! Who will be the judge as to whether it is brave?" he laughed.

"I shall."

"And when must it be performed?"

"Before the Duke, et ceteri perform theirs—if you wish to anticipate them."

"As I have said—the Duke et ceteri are not worrying me in the least. But a brave act! Good Lord! I'm neither a policeman—a fireman—nor a Carnegie hero."

"Being brave is not confined to saving lives," she admonished—"though, of course, that will be considered. Being brave may take any form of action."

"Even this?" he asked.

And stooping suddenly, he kissed her on the lips. . . . .

"Is that a brave act?" she inquired, looking at him steadily.

"You're to be the judge—it is a very pleasant one, however."

"Is it pleasant to take advantage of one's helplessness?"

"I was speaking only from one point of view—and one point of contact."

"You're a pig!" she exclaimed.

"I didn't act it," he protested.

"I ought to be angry with you," she said. "I ought to make you take me in doors at once. I ought never to forgive you."

"Have I offended so deeply?"

"Any other man would have offended past forgiveness," she replied, "but you seem just like a big brother, you know."

"You have evened up!" he laughed. "The next time I kiss you, it will be with your permission, either expressed or implied."

She looked at him with a shy smile—and could he have seen the light in her eyes he would have read his permission.

"Thank you for the consideration," she said. "If you keep on trying for the brave deed you may meet my approval——"

"Has the Duke, or the Marquis, or any of the others tried?"

"To kiss me? No. I've not trusted them sufficiently to give them a chance with me alone. I thought that the American could be trusted, but——"

"It is different with me—you're going to marry me."

"That is still an open question—very much open, indeed."

"It is only a question of a few months—at the most," he assured her.

"Positively I think we would better go in—or it will be only a question of a few minutes!" she laughed. "You have a very compelling way about you, Mr. Marmont. My resistance is growing very weak, indeed."

"Why resist?" he whispered.

"Also, a very persuasive way, Mr. Marmont."

"Be persuaded!" he urged.

"And a very fascinating way."

"Yes!" bending close.

"And a very adorable way."

"Yes!"

"And a brave way."

"Yes!"

"All of which—if you want it, dear—merits another kiss."

XVIII

THE BARON'S LETTER

When the Duke of Lotzen left the Council Chamber, after the Queen had dismissed him in the manner heretofore described, he drove leisurely back to Dornlitz and alighted at the Officers' Club on Alta Avenue. He had until midnight to quit the Capital, and he was not one to hasten the going—moreover, he was minded to try the temper and disposition of certain of the nobility, whom he had been led to believe were not unfriendly to him.

It was the luncheon hour, and the Duke's entrance created a sensation such as the Club had never known. What to do?—how to receive him?—whether to run away or to stay?

He was a Prince of the Blood—once removed from the Crown. He had not been in favor with the King and Queen five years ago, but what was their present attitude? So far as known, they had never mentioned his name—yet his property was untouched, and his rank, on the active list of the Army and the Navy, was still preserved. He would scarcely have returned to Dornlitz without the Royal permission. Moreover, that very morning he had been at the Summer Palace, when the Council met. All of which should indicate that

he was, at least, tolerated by their Majesties. And then while they were eagerly waiting some word that would enable them to trim to the Royal wind, behold! the Duke himself walked in among them.

He was the first to leave the Council; and having come straight to the Club he knew that no report had preceded him. He was in a humor which was typical—haughty, arrogant, sneeringly cynical, chillily polite. But inwardly he was raging as never before—raging to such a degree that revenge was his only thought and everything was bending toward that one end. And he would win the end—unaided by any save Bigler, and those he could hire for pay.

His appearance in the lobby of the Club was, to him, exceedingly amusing. The members seemed to catch their breath and to hesitate an instant, before they came forward to meet him after his long absence. There was an air of suppression—of uncertainty—of trying to be cordial without warmth—of greeting the personage without greeting the man—of being studiously polite while remaining in a state of equipoise.

And the Duke gave them no assistance. With his juniors he was reserved, with a certain aloofness natural to his dignity. With his military superiors he was respectful, but with the greatness of his birth always in his bearing. He selected a few of those highest in rank to lunch with him—they might not refuse, however much they would have

liked to do so—and he chose a table in the general dining-room, where all could see.

Hardly were they seated, when General Marquard and Baron Steuben entered the room, glanced with undisguised amazement at the Duke and those with him—and passed on, with the stiffest sort of bows.

"Won't you join us, messieurs!" the Duke called—loud enough for the entire room to hear.

"I beg your Royal Highness to excuse us," Marquard answered easily. "We can tarry, only a moment, for luncheon." And Steuben acquiesced with a slight bow.

"As you wish, sirs," said the Duke indifferently, as he turned away and resumed his conversation with the Duke de Nivier, nor seeming to notice the uneasiness that had settled on the company.

So he held them, while others came and went—looking askance at him and his party, while puzzled wonder shone from their eyes. At the end, he stood up and raised his glass.

"I give you a toast!" he said. And when, embarrassed and uneasy, they waited, he continued, smiling the while in comprehension. "I am about to leave you for a brief time, my lords, and I give you: To our future meeting and a quick return."

The double meaning was evident, yet they might not refuse to drink, for, on their face, the words were entirely proper and fitting. The response, however, was purely perfunctory and without spirit. Some simply touched their glasses, others raised

theirs just a bit; while several, as was their right with all due courtesy, only put their hand upon them—but no man drank the toast. And, at the quickest moment, they made their adieux and disappeared.

There was a contemptuously amused smile on the Duke's face, as he went out to his carriage—and it still lingered as he went up the broad marble stairway of the Ferida, and passed into his library.

From a divan, a slender figure rose and came quickly forward to meet him.

"Ferdinand!" she said, and put her arms around his neck. "Thank Heaven, you're safe!"

"It is pleasant to have some one glad to see you," he replied, and kissed her tenderly.

"I am always more than glad to see you, dear," she said softly.

He led her to a chair and drew her upon his knee. She waited—his hand held between her own, his arm about her waist.

"Well!" he said, presently. "You were right. I have until midnight to leave Dornlitz, and until noon to-morrow to quit Valeria. But you were wrong in this: it was Dehra who banished me, not the King—and she did it like a Dalberg, I admit."

"And you failed to impress the Council with Maximilian's decree?" she asked.

"The American was forearmed. He was aware that I had taken the Journal and the marriage register—that damned Courtney's brain had fer-

reted it out!—and he met me with other proof." And he told her just what had occurred. "Who would ever have supposed that I would be defeated by such a chance?" he ended.

"It is kismet," she replied.

"It may be kismet, but I am not persuaded," he said. "I want another try—another chance at the American—another chance at his calm face and muddled brain."

"Perhaps, some day, you will get the chance," she soothed.

"Perhaps I shall—and soon," he answered.

"We shall go to Paris—and wait."

"We will not go to Paris—and we will not wait!" he declared doggedly.

She regarded him with troubled eyes.

"You would retaliate?" she asked.

"I would save my own. Confiscate my estates? Never! I'll bring them to their senses—extort exemption for my own at the peril of death."

"Whose death, dear?" she inquired.

"I don't know—one of them: the American or the Queen or the Prince. I haven't determined, haven't laid any plans—yet."

"We shall lay them, dear—when you have considered the situation. At present, I think we should prepare to depart. You should obey the Queen's order—be properly submissive, for the time."

"For a short time," he added—"a very short time."

She smiled behind his back. It was sufficient for her purpose: a day gained was enough to give the fierce passion which possessed him an opportunity to cool. And it must cool—she must see to it—otherwise, there was fearful trouble ahead. Never before had she seen so fell a look on the Duke's face—no not even when he was fighting for his life in the King's library, and was surely losing. All the pent up hatred of the last five years seemed to have suddenly burst forth, threatening to sweep away all the discretion and quiet purpose that had been his anchors hitherto. So she played for time. If she could get him away from Dornlitz and Valeria, get him away from the American and the place, he would regain his accustomed frame of mind and be amenable to reason—would be reason itself, indeed. He would recognize the futility of present opposition, as he had recognized it twice before, and accept the inevitable—for the time. Let him be removed from the sinister and aggravating influences of defeat, and she had three weeks (until Epping and Steuben would return from America) to win him over to peace—perhaps, to such conduct as would save his estates from forfeiture.

"You have two, possibly three weeks before the writ of confiscation issues. So wait, until your passion has burned itself out, and you can see matters in their true proportion. If you decide now, you will decide wrong—and," she bent and kissed him caressingly, "you know it, dear."

"All that I know now is revenge," he said, letting his hand fall affectionately on the dark tresses.

"Precisely!—nor do I wonder. Nor am I asking, dearest, that you forego revenge. But revenge is surest when it is schemed with a calm mind."

"And sweetest when it comes instantly," he answered.

"You have waited five years—you can wait a few weeks longer," she urged.

"The five years have made the few weeks seem long to wait, sweetheart," he answered.

It was the first indication that she was winning, and she pressed on.

"I know, dear; I know how hard the trial is, and how difficult must be the waiting," she soothed. "But will not the revenge be the surer for the waiting?"

"You are a specious pleader!" he smiled. "You would get me away to Paris, in the hope that I'll relent."

"I would get you away from Valeria—but I care not a whit whether it be to Paris, or Vienna, or where it be, so that it meet your liking, and enable you to regain your wonted calm and deliberate judgment of the conditions which confront you."

"I am calm," he said.

"You are—but you will be calmer in Paris or Vienna."

"And the perspective from a distance will be different, think you not?"

"I trust so, dear," she replied.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because your mature judgment is dependable."

"You are against my revenge?"

"I am against a revenge which has as its sole purpose the elimination of the American. I have always said that the price you pay—even in the event of success—will be ashes in your hand. But I am not against you taking such steps as will prevent the forfeiture of your estates." She put both arms around his neck and rested her cheek against his, while the perfume from her hair rose heavy about him. "However, dearest, it is for you to decide, and I will do whatever I can to aid your plans—whether it be now, or to-morrow, or in a week—whether it be Paris, or Vienna, or here in Dornlitz. We have had five happy years together—let them continue or let them end, as my lord chooses. I should choose Paris, and life and light and happiness. But my choice is a woman's choice—and a woman's choice, under the circumstances, must not weigh with the man in making his decision."

"Your choice weighs with me, my Duchess," he replied.

"It is not right that it should weigh for more than it is worth, just because you love me, dearest." She was winning, and, like a clever woman, she was beginning to efface herself.

"It is not the first time that you have influenced me to my good—to our good, little one; nor shall

it be the last. I think if you tried—with your arms around me, and your dear face close to mine, and your kisses on my lips—you could turn me from the Crown itself."

"I should never seek to turn you from the Crown of your ancestors—if there were a chance to win it, sweetheart," she said, "and that though it would mean you would have to give me up."

"I would never give you up, Madeline!" he declared, holding her close. "If I might not make you Queen, then there would be no Queen, *ma belle*."

She kissed him lightly on the forehead. She had won—at least, for the time. She could hold him until Valeria was behind them, then Paris would be nearing fast.

"We shall scheme a plan by which you can save your estates," she whispered.

"At the price of the American?" he said, with a tinge of bitterness.

"At the least price you can pay," she answered. "We have three weeks, and much may be schemed in two, or even one."

She was too shrewd to intimate the plan she had framed. He was not in the proper state of mind to receive it—had not yet attained that calmness which would let reason dictate to hate and fury. She slipped from his knee to the floor.

"I shall go and tell De Varenne to prepare for our departure—on the night express?" she asked, with a last caressing touch to his hand.

He nodded.

"By the night express, my Duchess!—if you will go with me!" he smiled, detaining her a moment longer before he let her go.

As he did so, a step came down the corridor and paused at the library door for permission to enter.

"Welcome, Count," said the Duke. "Tarry a moment, Madeline, if you please." He turned to Bigler. "Well, what said Retz?"

The Count sat on a corner of the desk, swinging one leg to and fro and softly tapping the other with his riding crop—while a careless smile played around his mouth.

"Retz said just what I anticipated," he replied. "That the time is not ripe for them to move—that it would be folly to try it now, with conditions as they are. It could result only in disaster and defeat."

"The fearful ones!" the Duke sneered.

"Just what I suggested!" the Count laughed. "And to which Retz instantly agreed, with unblushing candor. 'Every one has his own neck to look out for,' he remarked."

"Just so!" Lotzen commented. "He was hot enough, when I was out of Valeria—but the instant I come across the border, he discovers that 'the time is not ripe.' I might have known it—it was the way of his ilk from the time the world began."

"We can't blame him for being properly careful of his own head," Bigler answered. "When you have made your play as to the American's

illegitimacy, he thinks the nobles will be more amenable to influence and favorable to a return of the old order and the elimination of the Queen in favor of yourself."

"Oh! he does!" said Lotzen, sweetly. "What if I have already made the play—and lost?"

"Lost! Lost! You have made the play and lost?"

"There is no need for saying 'lost' so often," the Duke sneered.

"Pardon, your Royal Highness!—I did not mean to offend," Bigler answered most respectfully. It was well not to venture too much with his master.

"I will tell you of it presently," said Lotzen. "Meanwhile, we are leaving Dornlitz this evening for Paris. You will need all the time to prepare—and Retz's story and excuses can bide till then."

The Count saluted and turned away. Half way across the room he paused.

"There is something I forgot to tell you, though it may not be of especial interest in view of Retz's present attitude. Mademoiselle De Marcellin and that fellow Marmont were at the Inn of the Twisted Pines this afternoon. They saw Retz come there—and then myself—and inferred that we met by appointment."

"You are sure?" the Duke asked.

"Tolerably sure! As I was leaving, I blundered in on the two in the big room—which Scartman had explained to me was closed in preparation for

a dinner to-night,—and when I apologized for interrupting their rendezvous, Marmont retorted by asking why and for what Retz and I had met."

"Have you told Retz?" Lotzen inquired, with a quiet smile.

"I assumed to telephone him."

"Good! We will let him explain the meeting, when the American puts him to the question."

"He also gave me this note for you—I almost forgot it."

The Duke took the small unaddressed envelope and tossed it unopened on the desk. The Count again saluted and went out. Madeline Spencer, after a few words of laughing comment on Retz's approaching difficulty, betook herself to her apartments to prepare for the coming journey.

Left alone, the Duke sat for a while in deep meditation, idly drumming on his chair. Presently he noticed the Retz envelope. Picking it up he mechanically tore it open and drew out the sheet. He glanced at it indifferently—then frowned and read—then read again—then a crafty look came into his eyes, and he smiled subtly.

"It may serve," he said; "yes, it may serve."

And taking a match from the stand at his elbow, he ignited the letter at one corner, and let it burn until the last fragment was consumed.

XIX

THE BROKEN AXLE

The Duke of Lotzen with Madeline Spencer, Count Bigler, and Mlle. de Varenne, departed from Dornlitz on the evening express, which crossed the Valerian border at midnight and landed them in Paris the next morning. They took no precautions to conceal their going—though all the Capital knew why they went, and at whose orders. No one was at the station to bid them farewell, and their exit was as quiet as a tradesman's—save for several of the secret police, who were on hand to speed their going—and to see that they went.

The following week, the King, Marmont, and I went off to a shooting box in the Voragian foothills about a hundred miles west of Dornlitz to fish for trout, which were very plentiful in the small mountain streams thereabout. We left the women behind, there being no accommodation for them in the tiny lodge—though, if there had been plenty of accommodation they would not have come, being wise as to masculine fishing parties, and the inappropriateness of their presence.

Dehra and Armand had continued regularly their early morning rides, and now that he was absent Miss De Marcellin went in his stead. In the summer, a morning gallop before breakfast was as

much a part of her Majesty's daily schedule as was breakfast itself. She would not have a groom accompany them, delighting at such times in being unattended, even by a servant. It killed the pleasure of the morning and the ride to have a stolid menial just out of ear shot—or just supposed to be—she said.

"Better take Moore or young Hatfield!" Armand had suggested—but she had laughed the advice aside.

"I'll have you, and Hildegarde will have—some one—in spirit," she replied.

So it came about that they rode unattended—and dire trouble resulted. Though, perhaps, the same result would have occurred had they taken a groom, or young Hatfield—or even Moore.

The third day after our departure, her Majesty and Hildegarde started at the usual hour. It was a beautiful June morning—which means much in Valeria, where the climate is particularly soft and balmy and seducing to laziness—the *dolce far niente* surpassing that of any land I have ever known.

"We shall not return before luncheon," the Queen said to her lady-in-waiting, as she and Hildegarde were leaving. "See that Miss De Marcellin's mother is advised." . . . . "I thought we would ride a little farther this morning," she remarked to Hildegarde as they mounted—"out to the Castle of Marmelin, which is about six miles beyond the Inn of the Twisted Pines. No one lives there except a care-taker and his family, but it is

picturesque and romantic, and the forest round about is redolent of legends of Siegfried and the Dragon, and other myths, which old Max knows well and loves to relate to anyone who will listen. We will stop at the Inn for breakfast, and then on to Marmelin and its tales of the long ago. You haven't been there with Mr. Marmont, or any of the others?"

"I've been to the Inn several times—but no farther!" smiled Hildegarde.

They passed the sentry at the gate, and, swinging to the left, rode rapidly northward.

"God preserve your gracious Majesty!" the soldier invoked, as he brought his rifle to the shoulder and resumed his beat.

The hour was early and the road was rarely travelled by others than those bound to or from the Summer Palace, and these were few, indeed, at any time of day, for the way was not that which led toward the Capital.

They had gone possibly two miles, and were gossiping as women do—and men also—when on rounding a sharp curve, with great trees growing on either side, they came upon a covered wagon drawn up in the middle of the road.

Four men, ordinary laborers from their dress, were clustered about it, two on either side, examining the front wheels. At the appearance of the two horsewomen, they scrambled up and stood respectfully aside to let them go by.

The position of the wagon, directly in the centre

of the track, made it necessary for the Queen and Hildegarde to pass on opposite sides. Even then the way was so narrow that their horses could barely squeeze through.

The Queen assuming that the men knew her—her portrait was in every home in Valeria—inquired what was the difficulty with the wagon.

"A broken axle, your Majesty," said one—and seized her bridle.

At the same instant, the other fellow caught her from behind and plucked her out of the saddle.

She gave a cry and twisted around to strike—but her arms were pinioned close to her sides. In a trice, a gag was forced into her mouth, a rope was whipped about her arms and legs, and a cloth was passed over her head and wrapped tight.

Meanwhile, Hildegarde had experienced exactly similar treatment from the men on her side, and almost before she realized what had happened the Queen and she were on the straw, in the bottom of the covered wagon, and were being driven rapidly away.

Miss De Marcellin fainted from fright. The Queen well nigh fainted from anger. Then the pain of the gag, and the stifling effects of the cloth about her head, began to have their effect, and, struggle against it as she might, she began slowly to lose consciousness.

She was dimly aware of straw being placed over and around her. She felt some substance in bags

being removed from under the straw and piled on top. She could feel their pressure around her, and she fancied she was covered also by them, though why she did not feel their weight upon her she did not know. There was a roaring in her ears—a numbness in her limbs—a powerlessness to resolve—a fading of memory—a slipping of the sentient—until at last came intervals of insensibility.

As in a dream, she heard them halt at the City gates—the query of the guard—the muttered answer of some one—and the rumbling of the wagon again. Then she knew no more until she awoke to consciousness—in a room as sumptuously furnished as her own apartment in the Summer Palace.

She was lying on the bed. The gag—the cloth—the ropes were gone. Her riding habit was arranged as though she were but reclining for a moment—her jacket was on the chair beside her, with her crop—her hat and her gauntlets were on the dressing table. And a maid sat in the window waiting.

As the Queen saw her, the girl arose and came forward.

"Your Majesty is awake?" she asked in French.

The Queen sat up and glanced slowly around.

"I suppose," she said, "it is useless to ask where I am?"

"Your Majesty is in the Ferida Palace," the maid answered.

"The Ferida Palace!" Dehra exclaimed. "What——"

She walked to the window and looked out. The park of the Palace was below her—the city around her—the Cathedral dome and the towers of the Castle, half a mile away. It was true! She was in her capital—and she was Lotzen's prisoner!

"Where is Miss De Marcellin?" she demanded.

"In the adjoining apartment—shall I summon her?"

The Queen nodded curtly. In a moment, Hildegarde entered. Dehra greeted her with a kiss.

"You are uninjured, dear, and unharmed?" she asked. "I am glad."

"Do you know where we are?" Hildegarde exclaimed.

"Yes—we are enjoying the hospitality of his Royal Highness the Duke of Lotzen."

"Then we are not prisoners?"

"I am afraid we are."

"But I don't understand!"

"Neither do I—exactly."

"Isn't this Dornlitz all about us?"

"It is Dornlitz—the Castle is yonder, you see."

"Then how can we be prisoners?"

"We are prisoners—because we are in prison."

"I can't comprehend how you, the Queen, can be a prisoner in your own capital."

"It is a bit difficult to comprehend, but it is a fact none the less. Cousin Lotzen is our jailor, my dear; and when you know the Duke better—as you're likely to do, I fear—you will understand

how the Queen can be under durance in her own capital."

"But why?—why?" Hildegarde cried. "What does it all mean?"

"It means, my dear, that the Duke is playing a game—the game of his life, indeed. What the game is, I do not know certainly—though I can guess it, I think." She turned to the maid. "If his Highness is here, let him be told that I wish to speak with him at once."

"Yes, your Majesty!" the maid answered, and went out.

The Queen chose a chair which would throw her face in the shadow and Lotzen's in the light.

Hildegarde sat on the window ledge, and was silent. She did not understand! Dehra was the Queen! Dehra was in her capital and within sight of the Castle, and Dehra was a prisoner! It was incomprehensible.

Then there was a sharp step in the corridor, a light knock on the door, and the Duke entered. He bowed low and waited.

But the Queen did not speak. Instead she looked him over from head to foot, slowly and disdainfully.

"So, sir!" she said at length—"you have ventured to return in defiance of our order."

"Your Majesty sent for me?" said Lotzen imperturbably.

"I did—to give you an opportunity to explain your conduct."

"I regret that you should have suffered any violence," said he, "but you must recognize that the manner of your seizure necessitated some little inconvenience on your part—which inconvenience I trust is at an end."

"You admit, then, that this unprecedented outrage on the person of your Sovereign and her cousin was by your direction."

"By my direction—and active leadership. I was the man who seized your Majesty from behind—and you made a tempting armful, I assure you. I envy the American!" he laughed.

She regarded him with scornful eyes.

"The American will not forget the insult," she said slowly.

"If you can prod him to it!" he sneered.

"We can leave the prodding to him—with entire assurance, cousin," she retorted.

"Or to me!" he answered.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Let us turn to the business before us. Since you accept full responsibility for this outrage, I assume that you hope to effect some end by it."

"O wise young judge!" he smiled.

"And that end?" she asked.

"I have already taken up with the American."

"How can that be—with his Majesty a hundred miles away?"

"I should have said that I have despatched a communication to him—which will reach him by

this afternoon. He will grant the conditions at once, I am persuaded, and we shall then instantly restore your Majesty to your throne and loving people."

"What are the conditions, cousin?"

"It would not profit you to know."

"Could not I grant them as well as his Majesty?"

"You could—but I would rather the American should grant them," he answered with a mocking smile.

"And if the King do not grant them?"

"On that score, I have no fear."

"But if he do *not?* What then?"

"Such a condition does not confront us yet."

"And your object in holding us prisoners is to coerce the King into granting your condition?"

"Your Majesty has stated it with admirable clarity."

"Then I shall endeavor also to state your conditions with 'admirable clarity,'" she replied. "They are—that your estates shall not be confiscated—that you shall be permitted residence in Valeria—and that you shall not be removed from your present place in the List of Succession."

He remained silent.

"Am I not right?" she asked.

A smile was his only answer.

"You decline to reply?"

He still was silent.

"Very well!" said she. "Be as obdurate as you wish, but also be assured that I shall not recognize any conditions which are granted to you, cousin. Your estates shall be forfeited, yourself banished, and you removed utterly from the Succession. You think to appeal to the King's clemency by threatening my life. Grant it, or the Queen dies, you have said to him. So be it! I will die; I refuse to make terms with a traitor. You may kill me—and then be killed yourself. If the exchange suits your purpose, well and good."

He laughed lightly. "You were not wont to be so melodramatic when I knew you—before the American came. I fancy you have caught it from him, cousin mine. 'You may kill me and then be killed yourself!' How fine and dramatic!—but not life, cousin, not life. You do not want to die, nor do I. And we shall not die—either of us—if the King is reasonable. You have forgot, he will not know your mind in the matter until *after* he has granted the conditions. And then, we venture, you will not shame him and his Kingship by attempting to over-rule what he has stipulated. Leastwise, we will risk it with equanimity. Have you any further communication?"

"Not with you, sir—at present."

"And I have your permission to withdraw?"

"You have—and to stay withdrawn until I send for you."

He backed to the door, and deferentially bowed himself out.

The Queen listened until his footsteps died away down the corridor, then she sprang up, and began to pace the floor.

"Lotzen is right!" she exclaimed. "Lotzen is right! Armand will yield to save me, and I shall have to acquiesce, unless I can get word to him that I shall not consent—that I will not honor the terms." She threw up her arms despairingly. "The Duke holds the whip hand, and he knows it —knows that Armand will yield," she repeated, "will do anything to save me." She turned to Hildegarde. "Don't think that I have forgotten you, dear, but you are in no danger of death. Lotzen will not harm you—you were taken because you were with me and to prevent your giving the alarm before they reached the Ferida. It was a bold stroke!—to seize a Queen as hostage for the King's word, and hold her prisoner in her own capital. Its very daring made its success—for don't you see, Hildegarde, the King risks my death if he assaults the Ferida? Twenty thousand soldiers in Dornlitz, and not a man may stir lest the Duke execute his threat! Help me to contrive a plan, Hildegarde—a play to circumvent this scheme of Lotzen's."

"You wish to get word to the King?" Miss De Marcellin asked. She was still a bit dazed by the events of the morning.

"Yes—but how to do it?—how to get a note out of this room and over the wall?"

"And if you don't succeed, the King, as I under-

stand it, will grant the Duke's conditions and you will go free?"

"Precisely," said the Queen, examining the window.

"Then, my dear Dehra, I should let the King grant the conditions and go free. It's the quickest way out, isn't it?"

The Queen shook her head. "You don't understand, Hildegarde. It would be surrender to Lotzen—Lotzen, whom I despise more than anything on this earth. No! Armand shall *not* grant the conditions."

XX

THE WAY IN

"How would you like to go back to Dornlitz tomorrow morning instead of the day after," said the King, when we had lighted our cigars after the evening meal, and settled back to enjoy our smoke, as only tired men who have been whipping a stream all the day, for three days, can do.

"Your vote first, Marmont—you're the junior," said I.

"I'm ready to do anything that his Majesty wishes," was his answer.

"Which isn't voting!" Armand laughed. "To go, or not to go—which gets it?"

"Not to go!" said Marmont.

"You beggar! It would serve you right if we held you to it. I shall tell Hildegarde, at all events, and she may punish you as she sees fit. Now here's Courtney; he stands with me, I know. I'm sure he has fished enough to last him a year."

"To last the balance of my natural life," I replied. "I had sufficient after the first day."

"I had sufficient before we left Dornlitz!" laughed Marmont. "Life in the woods has no attraction for me—even with a king for company. I prefer the comforts of civilization. I reckon I've become effete."

A servant entered with a letter.

Armand took it, glanced at the address, and ran a knife under the flap. Marmont and I kept up the conversation—while the servant moved back and stood at attention waiting.

"When did this come?" I heard the King ask.

"While your Majesty was at dinner," the servant replied. "The man who brought it directed that it be delivered to your Majesty after the meal was ended."

"See if he is still there," was the order.

When the servant had gone, he turned and flung the letter to me.

"Read!" he said. "Great God! read!"

He was tremendously agitated—his dark countenance was pale with anger, his eyes blazed, his hands trembled. With the greatest difficulty, he was forcing himself to remain calm.

"Read! man, read!" he exclaimed.

And I spread out the letter and read.

"*Ferida Palace*
"*Dornlitz.*

"*My Honoured and Respected Cousin:—*

"*Upon a more mature reflection than was afforded me at the Council meeting recently, I have concluded that it will not be conducive to my best interests to have my estates in Valeria confiscated by the Crown. It will hamper me in my expenditures, as well as render it impossible for me to return to Valeria in*

the future. This latter privilege I am especially averse to renounce, for however much I may dislike and condemn the present system of government, yet the time may come—and be, indeed, not far distant —when the old order of Succession will be restored, and the Kingdom will resume its wonted way.

" To this end—that my estates may be preserved from forfeiture and my residence in Valeria be unmolested—I have thought it best to take, as an assurance thereof, the person of her Majesty, and to confine her in Ferida Palace until such time as I receive your word that the terms shall be adhered to. I will accept your simple word, cousin, because —despite what else you may be—you are an honourable man, and one whose word, once passed, is inviolable—neither will you permit it to be violated by others.

" I suggest, for the good of us both, as well as the Kingdom in general, that you do not disclose the fact to the Court that her Majesty is a prisoner. It will profit you nothing, and it may occasion you some embarrassment, not to say difficulty. Any attempt to rescue her, or to enter the Ferida, will be the signal for her instant death, so it will avail you nothing to kill me, for the Queen will be dead before me. If you should elect to exchange her Majesty's life for mine, you have the power to effect it and I shall have to submit. I undertook this adventure with the full appreciation of its possible peril to myself. It is little enough I ask, and I am per-

suaded that you will look at the matter sensibly and grant it. If at the end of three days I have received no word from you, I shall then determine upon my future course. In the meantime, I beg to remain,

"Your humble and obedient servant,

"Lotzen."

"P. S. I neglected to say that your cousin, Miss De Marcellin, is a prisoner, also, and will be subjected to the same terms as those specified for her Majesty." *"L."*

When I had finished I passed it across to Marmont without a word. Armand, who had been pacing the floor, abruptly threw himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Marmont finished the letter, gasped suddenly at the postscript, and started up with a fierce exclamation. I laid my hand on his arm and pointed toward Armand. He gasped again and sat down.

Presently the King looked up. The outward storm of passion was gone and his face was calm, with the calm that is like iron which has passed from the red heat to the white.

"What shall I do?" he asked.

"There is but one thing to do," said I—"grant the terms."

"Grant the terms," echoed Marmont.

"Yes—I shall grant the terms," the King said slowly. "The Duke has won—he can dictate as he pleases—and we are helpless to strike back. The King's word once given cannot be violated. Duress

will not excuse me, for I waive duress when I accept his terms—as he has taken due care to state, inferentially but plainly. No, the Duke has won this throw. It exasperates me to make terms with a traitor. Yet, after all, it is but a sentiment; and in exchange Marmont and I get that for which we would gladly give up two kingdoms, and all else besides." He arose. "Come! we will hasten to Dornlitz and release the prisoners. Prisoners! In the very midst of Dehra's capital—with her troops around her, her flag over all, her king in command and powerless to save her except on Lotzen's terms!"

"Do you think Lotzen would kill the Queen and Hildegarde if you were to attack the Ferida?" Marmont asked.

"I am absolutely sure of it. Lotzen makes no idle threats." He turned to me for confirmation.

"He would kill them, though we were at the very door," said I.

"A pleasant sort of chap to have in the family," Marmont commented.

"There is only one Lotzen," I returned.

"Yes! thank God!" the King exclaimed. "And if the proper opportunity ever comes there shall not be even one."

By dint of hard riding, and a special train, which by reason of a wreck was eight hours late in getting to our station for us, we reached Dornlitz shortly after nine o'clock the next morning.

We found that the Palace had been much per-

turbed over the Queen's unexplained absence, but the officials knowing of her dislike for notoriety had hesitated to institute a search. Moreover, it was not unusual for her to ride off and be absent the entire day or even until the following day—though on the latter occasions she was always accompanied by a considerable suite. It was Mrs. De Marcellin who had aroused the household and insisted that some measures be taken to locate the missing ones. This, while they mollified her to the best of their power, they had not yet done. When the King had telephoned from the first station, apprising them of his intended return, and replying, to their carefully guarded inquiry concerning her Majesty, that she would return to-morrow, they were much relieved, and not a little gratified that they had resisted Mrs. De Marcellin's importunities and insistence.

When we drove into the courtyard, a carriage was standing before the entrance, and as we whirled by a face looked out. The King recognized it instantly.

"Mademoiselle de Varenne!" he exclaimed. "Stop!" to the coachman.

At the same instant, Mlle. de Varenne sprang down and ran toward us.

"Your Majesty!" she cried—very excitedly, I thought. "I have been seeking you, and the guard would not——"

"You have found me, mademoiselle!" said the King, bowing.

"I have a letter for you from the Queen! She is——"

"Hush!" he commanded.

She glanced at him somewhat timidly—then took the arm he offered and he led her to the private entrance; we following, Marmont and I, in the carriage.

"Come!" the King motioned to us, and we passed on upstairs and through the library to his cabinet.

"Now," said he, when he had shown Mlle. de Varenne to a chair, "you may give me the Queen's letter, mademoiselle."

From the bosom of her gown, she drew a sheet of paper and handed it to him. It was without an envelope but I noticed it was written in ink. Hastily written, I saw, when, having read it, Armand passed it across to me. It ran:

"*Dearest:—*

"*I have seen the Duke—and though he declined to disclose the terms which he says he has given you, I can guess that they involve a stipulation that his estates shall not be forfeited, etc., and I told him I would never consent to make terms with a traitor, and that I would over-rule any concessions which he forces from you. He answered that as you would not be aware of my non-consent until after my release, he would venture my attempting to set aside your kingly word after it was given. And in this he is correct. But if you receive this*

letter before you have granted his terms, you are forbidden to yield—and though it hurts me to invoke the authority, dearest, yet, as Head of your House, I command you to observe the prohibition. I prefer to die rather than to yield, in the slightest degree, to a forsworn dastard. And my death will be sweet in that I shall know that you will kill him speedily, and be quit of him henceforth—you and Henry.

"I am confiding this letter to a Mlle. de Varenne who is, she says, minded to help me to leave this den of villainy. She may be deceiving me, but she is my only trust. If you should penetrate the Ferida, with Moore and a few other good blades, and rescue me, you will be very welcome, sweetheart. But you will have to be careful, my love, or it will be a barren rescue—for I think the Duke means to kill me ere he himself is killed. Hildegarde, I am sure, will not be harmed—she is being held prisoner because she was with me when they seized us on the forest road.

"Mlle. de Varenne is waiting—I may write no more. In life and death, my dearest, I am yours alone." *"Dehra."*

I handed back the letter to the King.

"Well?" he demanded.

"It is what I feared," said I. "She will grant nothing to Lotzen."

"And she binds me on my obligation as a Dal-

berg. As the Head of the House, she commands and I am sworn to obey. It is our oath. What shall I do?"

"Let us hear, first, how Mademoiselle de Varenne escaped from the Ferida, and when," I suggested.

"Will you tell us, mademoiselle?" the King said.

"Do you wish the whole story briefly, sire?" she asked.

The King nodded.

"I fancy it doesn't matter how we went to Paris and then returned to the Ferida," she began.

"Not at present," said I. "Begin with when you first saw her Majesty."

"Beyond the fact that we were in Dornlitz in violation of the royal order, I was not informed," she said. "I was instructed that we must not be seen, nor our presence disclosed to anyone outside the Ferida. As I told his Majesty in Washington, I never inquire for reasons. I accept conditions, if my comfort and ease are not restricted. Of course, I assumed the Duke and Bigler were engaged in some plot, but that did not concern me.

"Yesterday afternoon, while strolling alone through the grounds of the Ferida, I heard a tap on a window above me. Looking up, I saw a woman behind the glass. I could scarcely believe my eyes. It was the Queen, or her double. She motioned that she could not raise the sash but that she wished to communicate with me. I signalled back that I would

try to effect it. Instantly she drew a ring from her finger, cut a piece from the glass and pressed it out. I broke its fall by catching it on my parasol.

"'Are you the Queen?' I asked wonderingly.

"She nodded. 'You will take a letter for me to the King?' she demanded quickly.

"'I will try,' said I. 'Is it possible that you are a prisoner, madame?'

"'Yes!'

"'Then I will also try to manage your escape.'

"'Get the letter to the King first. Then we will try the escape,' she whispered.

"'Have you the letter ready?'

"'In a quarter of an hour—come back. Who are you?' she asked.

"I told her my name.

"'What are you doing here?'

"'I *was* Bigler's friend, but I am your servant now, madame. I have had enough of this villainy,' said I."

(Mlle. de Varenne was very clever, indeed. She had instantly appreciated that there was infinitely more for her in delivering the Queen's letter and aiding her escape, than as Bigler's *belle amie*—who might not be his *belle amie* to-morrow. It was a dazzling opportunity. And I am doing her no injustice in the inference, for the main chance is, to such women, the whole philosophy of life.)

"I returned presently, but saw no one—and it was half an hour later before the Queen appeared

again at the window. She shook her head and did not speak. I noticed that the curtain was drawn forward across the hole in the glass. She motioned to her watch, and held up four fingers. I understood. At four o'clock I sauntered again through that portion of the grounds. Presently the Queen appeared. The letter fluttered down. I caught it and hid it in my gown.

"'Make haste!' she said. 'Make haste!'

"I knew that I dared not venture to go out by any of the regular exits from the grounds—they all were locked securely. The postern gate alone was available, and it was guarded by the Duke's own confidential servant, who would not have permitted even Bigler to pass without his master's permission. When we had returned to the Ferida, however, the four of us—the Duke, Bigler, Madeline and I—had entered not by the usual methods, but by a secret way——"

The King sat up sharply.

"A secret way!" he exclaimed. "Is there a secret way?"

"A secret way, sire, which leads from a house outside the walls to within the palace proper—to the Duke's own library, in fact."

"And you came that way?" the King demanded.

"I came that way," she answered. "I may not care for the ordinary motives and solutions, but when they have to do with such romantic things as secret passages nothing escapes me. From the time

we entered the house outside the walls until, within, we stepped from the hidden way, I saw everything, though seemingly I saw nothing—everything save one—that one missed me. Because the Duke and Bigler were in my way, I did not see how the door that admitted to the palace was opened."

"You saw him close it?" I asked.

"He simply pushed it shut."

"You saw him open the door in the house when you entered the passage?"

"Yes—I can open it."

"And you opened it from the palace side, when you came out with the letter?"

She nodded.

"When did you escape?" the King inquired.

"Between seven and eight this morning. I drugged the Count's wine last night, and left him sleeping peacefully. The Duke does not arise until nine, and Madeline is not visible much before noon. I had no difficulty—in fact, it was very easy."

"Do you intend to return?" the King asked.

She looked at him shrewdly.

"I do not, sire," she replied.

"Is Mrs. Spencer aware that her Majesty is a prisoner?"

Whereat I marvelled somewhat—until I remembered the Spencer woman's hatred for the Queen.

"I cannot say," Mlle. de Varenne answered slowly. "Madeline is the Duke's confident in much that he does, and she has a different policy in life

from mine, but I cannot think she is a party, even unwillingly, to such an outrage."

"And Bigler?" he asked.

"Bigler does whatever the Duke wants. Of course he knows—though he has the faculty of keeping his own counsel."

"How many are in the palace?"

"Three men-servants and a couple of maids."

"You can find again the house containing the entrance to the secret passage?"

"I can—it is 747 St. Germain street."

"And you will pilot us through the passage and open the door which admits to the palace?"

"I will, to the door—but not inside."

"I understand."

"Are you familiar with the interior of the palace?" she asked.

"Only in a general way with the rooms on the second floor," the King replied, and glanced at me.

I knew he was thinking of the night, five years before, when Dehra and he had penetrated the Ferida, hoping to surprise Lotzen with the lost Book of Laws, and had nearly met their death in consequence.

"Then you know the location of the Duke's library," she said, "and to the right on the main corridor, the first door beyond the turn, is the Queen's apartment. You can't mistake it."

"When is the best time to make the entrance?" he asked.

"Before they discover my absence."

"And that, in the ordinary course, will be?"

"I directed my maid not to disturb me, and so arranged the bed clothes that they would appear as though I still was sleeping. You can take, I think, until noon, maybe one o'clock, before there is any danger. Of course, when they discover that I am gone, they will know how I went, and then—you can guess better than I what will be the result."

He regarded her contemplatively and in silence. I think she knew what was in his mind, for she smiled slightly, and calmly waited for him to speak.

"Why should I believe your tale?" he asked suddenly.

"Because it is true," she responded.

"True, I have no doubt, so far as concerns the secret passage—but what shall we find awaiting us at the other end?"

"I do not know."

"That is the important question to us. Will we be met by a volley, or will we be met by the normal accident of events?"

"You mean, am I trying to lure you to death?"

The King bowed assent.

"Have you forgot, sire, the Café Republique and the information I gave you there? It was accurate, was it not?"

"It was accurate, mademoiselle, in more ways than one—and especially accurate, in point of time, for the poisoned wine to reach us."

"I do not understand!" she exclaimed.

"Naturally!"

"What I did at the Café Republique was done in good faith," she declared. "I know absolutely nothing of poisoned wine. On my honor, I——" she paused and her face grew scarlet.

It was more convincing of innocence than all the protestations and oaths she could have uttered.

"I do not wonder that you should doubt," she admitted frankly. "However, you have the Queen's letter—it is genuine, you must admit—to sustain me and her request for assistance. And you have me, also. If you wish to leave me here under guard, I will show you how to work the hidden springs, as best I am able."

"What do you hope to gain, mademoiselle, by forsaking your friends?" the King asked.

"Her Majesty's gratitude!" she answered, looking him straight in the eyes. "I am not what the world calls 'a good woman.' I love luxury and ease and a full purse, and I am willing to—trade myself in exchange for them. But I am not willing to consort with those who would do murder, even for a throne, and so I am here. You may enter the Ferida or you may not, as it pleases you, but, believe me, I am telling you the truth, and whatever *you* do, I am done with Bigler."

The King glanced at his watch.

"May I ask you to wait in the next room a moment," he said.

She arose instantly, and Armand held the door open for her to pass. He closed it and turned to us.

"What do you say, Dick—shall we try it?"

"Are you bound by the Queen's order not to grant Lotzen's terms?" I asked.

"I am bound," he said simply.

"Then I should make the try at once," I said.

He looked inquiringly at Marmont.

"I believe De Varenne's story," Marmont replied.

"It is either the secret passage," the King said slowly, "or a quick attack in overpowering force on all sides of the Ferida, and trust to fortune and Dehra's and Hildegarde's pluck to defend themselves until help arrives. The former would be much the better for success, if it is not a plant—a frame-up, based on the Queen's letter and my known headstrongness. The latter, however, would be——"

He paused, and with his fingers beat nervously on the table before him. Then he walked to the window and back—and again to the window and back, his head bent upon his breast. Suddenly, with the quick straightening of the shoulders I knew so well, he looked up. He had made his decision.

"We will try the secret passage—and at once," he said.

"Good!" exclaimed Marmont. "Just a moment until I get my automatic. I'll have to borrow a sword from you, Major, however."

"You can fence?" the King smiled.

"A little—about enough not to trip over my scabbard. The pistol is more in my line. I'm a fair hand with *that*."

"I knew you would want to go," Armand said. "Very well, I will take you, Moore, Marsov, De Coursey, and Du Plessis—I think they will be sufficient, Dick?"

"Am I to be left out?" I asked.

"Why should you take the risk, Courtney?" the King said.

"I want to go."

"Helen isn't a prisoner," he argued.

"If she were, I shouldn't have asked permission. As it is, she would have me go—if she knew. One more will not hamper your party, and I can fight a bit, if I must."

"If Helen consents, I'm more than willing to have you, old man," he replied, laying his hand on my arm, "but it doesn't seem quite right to her for you to go otherwise."

"It isn't right, and I'll tell her at once," said I, and I went in search of my wife.

I found her just completing her morning toilet. At a sign from me she dismissed the maid, and held up her lips to be kissed.

"I heard that you had returned," she said.

"And I'm off again immediately."

"Tease!" she laughed.

"I'm off again immediately," I repeated, gravely, "to help rescue the Queen."

"The Queen! The Queen!" Helen cried. "The King knows where she——what has happened?"

"She is Lotzen's prisoner in the Ferida," I said.

"Lotzen's prisoner! In the Ferida! Isn't Lotzen banished?"

"He is banished—and he has returned," I answered. And, briefly, I told her what we knew—and of our plan.

"Why need you go, dearest?" she exclaimed.

"Because the Queen is in great peril—and that Queen is Dehra," said I.

One moment she looked up at me! Then her arms went around my neck.

"Go! dearest, go!" she whispered. "It is your duty to the Queen—to Dehra!—but, oh! come back to me, sweetheart, come back!"

I bent and kissed her.

"It is not so dangerous for us," said I lightly. "The danger is for her—but we will save her, never fear."

Then I kissed her again, and went jauntily from the room. My heart, however, was not so jaunty, I assure you.

XXI

THE LAST TRY

It was just ten—the Cathedral bell was striking the hour—when the King, Mlle. de Varenne, Marmont and I, with Moore on horseback beside the carriage, drove away from the Summer Palace.

De Coursey, Marsov, and Du Plessis were waiting for us at Army Headquarters in Dornlitz when we arrived. Moore spoke a word to them, and they all went off together.

Bidding me come with him, the King passed quickly into the Governor's room. General Febiger was expecting us—he had been advised by telephone to await his Majesty in his office.

"General!" said the King, "I give you here a sealed order. If at one o'clock I have not recalled it, you will break the seal and proceed instantly to its execution."

The General's heels clicked together, and his hand rose in salute.

"Yes, your Majesty!"

"And you will execute it to the uttermost—though it be necessary to call upon the entire force under your command."

"Yes, your Majesty!"

"It is an order," said the King to me, as we went back to the carriage, "which, in event of dis-

aster to us, will be effective to end Lotzen's career. It directs Febiger to take the Ferida forthwith by assault, to rescue the prisoners if possible, and to seize Lotzen, dead or alive—and, if alive, to try him instantly by court-martial on the charge of treason."

"I understand," said I. "It is the end for the Duke."

"It is the end," he answered. "He dies either by our hand or under the order, ere the day be done. We *may* lose also, Dick, but for him it is the last try."

St. Germain street is short and narrow, and leads between Alta Avenue and Forheim street. It was a French neighborhood, two hundred and more years ago, and hence the name. The houses were old and for the most part dilapidated—the inhabitants of the respectable class, but, like the houses, very much impoverished and out at the elbows. All the land was owned by the Duke of Lotzen, who let it be understood that he intended some time to throw it into the Ferida grounds—to explain why he permitted such an eye-sore to remain.

"I understand now why the Duke preserves St. Germain street," said the King. "It conceals this secret passage—which his mode of life finds most convenient, in that it enables him to go and come as he pleases and no one is ever the wiser. You say the house is unoccupied, mademoiselle?"

"It is quite bare of furnishings, and I saw no one on either occasion," she replied.

"Moore will have investigated," he said, and relapsed into silence.

At the corner of Forheim and the street next to St. Germain the carriage drew up and we alighted. A gentle rain was falling, and Mlle. de Varenne gathered her skirts about her, in the Paris fashion, and, with me holding the umbrella, tripped rapidly along. The King and Marmont followed, the former with his cap drawn down over his face and his undress uniform covered by his rain-coat. Marmont and I also wore rain-coats—for the rain, but more especially to hide the swords we were wearing. Civilian dress and swords are somewhat incongruous.

When we reached St. Germain, Mlle. de Varenne, with an exclamation of disgust, lifted her skirts still higher, and picked her way daintily over the muddy sidewalk. Some few of the residents were visible—mostly women—who eyed us curiously but respectfully. Evidently people of our class were not unknown in the neighborhood, and we attracted but little attention.

Number 747 was a two-story brick and frame dwelling—with the upper story overhanging the street. It was weather-beaten and old, but the steps leading to it were firm and substantial. The shutters were closed, and the house was plainly untenanted. A formidable key-hole was in the door,

promising a huge lock on the inside, but the glint of a small circular piece of brass some distance above it indicated that a modern lock had replaced the cumbersome one of old. Lotzen's reputation was sufficient, apparently, to insure his property from harm though untenanted.

"It is well that I thought to release the catch," mademoiselle remarked.

And as echo of her words, the door was opened for us from within by Moore. The three others were also there.

The King threw off his coat, loosened his sword and felt for his revolver. Marmont and I did likewise—but being less used to a sword and a revolver, it took us longer to loosen and to feel. It might be that we were a bit nervous, as well—and I reckon this was true in my case. Indeed, it still makes me nervous to think of our entry into the Ferida and the—— But, again, I anticipate—though as it has been some time since I last offended the habit does not appear to be growing on me, thank Heaven!

"Stick to the sword, gentlemen!" the King cautioned. "The revolver will be resorted to only as a last necessity, and then not until I give the command. Better we all should die than that her Majesty should be imperiled."

He glanced at his watch. "It is eleven o'clock —mademoiselle, we are ready."

With a dazzling smile—she never forgot that Armand was the King—she passed quickly into the

inner room. Opening a large closet at the right of the fire-place, she pressed firmly on the wall at the rear.

At first she was unsuccessful—the wall would not move. She played up and down it, with head bent close to hear. Moore grew restless, Marmont frowned, De Coursey tugged at his belt—I found myself pulling nervously at my imperial.

Suddenly she gave a little cry and stepped back—the wall was revolving slowly inward.

"There, your Majesty, is the passage!" she said.

"I am your servant, mademoiselle," he replied.

Moore sprang forward to enter first, but the King stopped him.

"I will lead, messieurs, if you please—I and mademoiselle," and stepping in he offered her his hand.

"There are no steps, sire," she said, "until we approach the Ferida."

He drew out an electric torch and snapped it.

"I see—it goes gradually down," he answered, as the light shot out.

The path was plain and easy. There were no rats, no vermin, no dirt, and very little of the impure air and dark green mould such as I had always imagined fouled under-ground passages.

The way itself was built, on all four sides, of some cut stone, granite I think—which doubtless accounted for the cleanliness and the absence of things creeping. In height, it was nearly seven feet—at least De Coursey, who was a trifle over six

feet, could walk erect and have plenty of head room to spare; in width, about three feet—sufficient for two persons to pass without inconvenience.

With Armand and mademoiselle in the lead, and De Coursey and Marsov bringing up the rear, we went quickly down the passage until we came to the steps, which signified that we were within the Ferida.

"Go very quietly now," she cautioned. "We are approaching the Duke's apartments."

"Wait!" she said, a second later. "I think it wiser for all to remain here until you have investigated, sire."

The King raised his arm.

"You and Mr. Courtney come with me," he directed. "Your counsel may be needed, Dick, and, if so, I want you at hand."

So I, perforce, stepped forward and climbed the winding stairway that was concealed inside the wall of the Palace. I would have felt much better had the others come back of me. Instead, they waited at the foot of the steps. I crept up close behind mademoiselle—the heliotrope perfume, which she affected, filling my nostrils with its sweetness.

"Hush!" she whispered suddenly. "Don't you hear the Duke's voice?"

We paused. Instantly Armand darkened the torch. We listened. The faint sound of a voice came from above. I could not recognize it. It lasted for a few words—then ceased.

"It was the Duke!" she insisted.

"It was some one, at all events," returned the King—"but where is he?"

"In the library," she said.

"Then the entrance is open?"

"It must be—and yet I closed it."

"It is better open," said Armand. "Be careful—the least noise may precipitate everything. You, mademoiselle, stay here—Dick, come with me."

We heard him move away in the darkness. I felt mademoiselle draw back against the wall—a moment later, I had passed her and followed the King on my hands and knees. Presently, I touched him.

"I'm against the wall," he whispered, his mouth close to my ear. "The door ought to be somewhere hereabout, but I can't see any light nor detect the least sound—and I hesitate to snap the torch."

"Don't snap it yet," I replied.

We listened intently, for what I thought was ten minutes—it seemed at least half an hour, and likely it was not over a fifteenth of that time.

"Will you go back and tell mademoiselle to bring up the others?" said he. "Bid them creep. I would go, but I'll have to pass you and that may——"

I was gone. I delivered my message and returned again to the King.

"Anything?" I asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "We will wait until the rest come up then I'm going to have some light—and let mademoiselle open the way, if she can."

"She's been right thus far," said I.

He pressed my shoulder. It meant, I knew, that he still trusted her.

There was a swishing sound below me—and I felt mademoiselle's hand on my arm.

"You're here?" I asked.

"Everyone is here," was the answer.

"Everyone is here," I repeated to Armand.

I heard him draw out the torch. Then a voice came distinctly, but far, far away it seemed—the voice of Madeline Spencer. The King caught his breath—and his fingers gripped mine.

"Ferdinand," she said, "I have just learned something. Is it true that you have the Queen a prisoner in the Ferida?"

"It is true, Madeline," the Duke's tones replied. "Do you object, my dear?"

I would have given much to have seen her expression and his.

"I do object—most strenuously object!" she exclaimed.

"You have no cause, sweetheart," he interrupted.

"I object because of its folly," she retorted—"its stupendous—its silly folly. Was it for this that you returned so suddenly to Dornlitz?"

"It was."

"And you told me it was a letter of Retz's!"

"I told you truly. It was a letter of Retz's—which gave me the idea."

"It didn't give you much more than the idea," she replied scornfully—"unless it also gives you to the executioner."

"It will not give me to the executioner!" he laughed. "There was a chance, but that chance is past. I have her Majesty, and I will have my terms, never fear."

"And the terms?"

"My property and my freedom in Valeria."

"Or what?"

"Or her Majesty's quick demise."

"And you—after the demise?"

"I shall depart beyond the border."

"Of the earth, you mean."

"I think not, sweetheart. Moreover, the demise will not happen. The American and I shall agree."

"He will take the Ferida by assault."

"And find a dead Queen."

"He will kill you."

"What will it profit him?—Dehra will be dead. No! No! little one. The American is sufficiently foresighted to appreciate the situation. He is not one to trade his wife's life for mine—I'll do him that much credit."

"You are very right," she answered. "He would not trade his wife's life, even for his own and all the world besides—but he will rescue her and kill you, Ferdinand."

"Want to make a wager on it?" he laughed.

"A ruby ring against a kiss from those ruby lips, that are trying to be so severe—and can only look the more tempting."

"You may take the lips without the wager, dear," she replied.

There was silence for a little while. The King leaned down and whispered:

"Will she move him, I wonder!"

"Won't you be warned before it is too late, dearest?" she began. "You have time enough yet."

"Time enough for what, little one?" he said.

"Time enough to retreat—time enough to release the Queen and to fly."

"To fly, and, having flown, release the Queen," he corrected.

"You can be across the border in five hours—and be in safety," she pleaded. "Won't you go, dear? Won't you go?"

"And let my property be confiscated and me banished?"

"Let them take anything, so long as you have your life."

"And that, too, just when I am on the brink of success?"

"On the brink of final defeat," she replied.

"That is where we disagree, sweetheart," he replied. "You permit your feelings to control your judgment."

"It is a sane judgment, nevertheless."

"But not a wise one under the existing conditions."

"And a safe judgment"—she went on—"the safest possible under the conditions."

"Safe judgments are not always the best—nor always safe."

"Do it for me, dear," she implored. "Give up this folly and let us away—away from this awful Valeria, and plots, and assassination and death."

"You may go," he answered.

"Not without you, Ferdinand!"

"You are in no danger," he answered her. "You may depart the secret way, whenever you wish."

"I want you to go with me," she persisted.

"I will join you—when I have won my terms from the American."

"You will never win, sweetheart."

"You think he will trade lives?" he laughed.

"You will never win," she repeated. "You will lose *your* life, but the Queen's life will be preserved."

"Nonsense, dear!" he answered. "There was danger—grave danger—until I had the Queen safely in the Ferida. Now, it is simply waiting for a day—until this afternoon, indeed—for the American to agree. To-morrow it will all be over—Dehra will be free again, and we on our way to Paris. To Paris! little one—to *cher Maxim's, la chaleur communicative du banquet.*"

"We shall never go to Paris—unless we go to-day," she answered.

"Why, child?"

"Because, Ferdinand, you will be dead!"

"I have no feeling of impending dissolution!" he laughed.

"It is madness," she returned.

"Not to feel it?" he inquired.

"Not to know that you cannot win. The American, as you call him, has won everything thus far, he will win to the end."

"And that end is my death?"

"Haven't you made it so?—haven't you threatened, not *his* life, but the Queen's? He may scorn your attacks on himself—he will never forgive this violence to the woman he loves."

"I am not concerned for his forgiveness—it is his word I want."

"And you will trust his simple word?" she asked.

I suppose he nodded, for she instantly followed with:

"That is the one indication of intelligence you have displayed in this scheme, dearest—but it is at the wrong end; it is premised on success."

"You're a miserable croaker—and with success but a few hours away!" he laughed. "I tell you, Madeline, it is impossible for me to lose. Were you in like case with the Queen, wouldn't I do anything to save you? Think you the American will do less for Dehra?"

"The American would renounce the plot, if Dehra besought him," she replied.

"And I will not?"

"You have not—yet."

"Sweetheart," he said, "if there were the slightest chance of failure I would give over. Why won't you be convinced?"

"Because, Ferdinand, I am convinced of the contrary. You have not the slightest chance of success."

"The Queen is my prisoner," he reminded her.

"Of ultimate success, I mean."

There was silence again. I could fancy her beguiling him by all the arts of personal fascination she knew so well how to employ. Then presently:

"You will go, dearest?" she coaxed.

"Where?"

"From Valeria, with me."

"I'll go anywhere with you, little one."

"To-day—now?"

"Perhaps."

"And you will set the Queen free?"

"Perhaps."

There was a smile in his voice.

"And shall I tell Claire we are to go?"

"Yes—tell Claire, *ma belle*—and do you be ready."

"You're a dear," she said.

I am sure she kissed him, for he called:

"One more, sweetheart, one more!"

It was followed by a pause.

"*Ma cherie duchesse*—for a little while then," he said.

I knew that she had gone out.

"Has she won?" whispered the King. "Will he release the Queen?"

Lotzen himself answered.

"For a little while, *ma duchesse*—until the American agrees to my terms, which should be before the day is done!" He laughed. "Madeline is fascinating and alluring, but I let her control only where her way runs with mine, or I am indifferent."

He laughed again, and then began to sing. It came very faintly—the Toreador's song from Faust.

"Shall we try to enter now or wait until he has gone out?" I asked.

"We will wait—but we must enter before one o'clock—or send some one back to warn Febiger to hold his attack."

So we sat—as motionless as possible—cramped—blinded by the darkness, through which we strove to see and could not. My joints ached—my legs were stiffened—my brain began to throb—I could feel the pulsation of my heart. My nerves got on edge—I had an almost uncontrollable impulse to shout. I pressed my nails into my hands and gritted my teeth in the effort of repression. I leaned forward and touched the King—and when I touched him, he jumped as though I had struck him. He, too, was on edge.

"I am going to make a light," he said. "Just for something to do to relieve the tension."

"We need it," I agreed.

"Tell mademoiselle to come closer—I want her to look for the spring to the door."

I told her; and putting my arm around her, I drew her carefully up beside me.

The torch shot out its light on to the wall before us. It was of stone, the same as elsewhere.

"Do you wish to enter now, sire?" she asked. "Because, if I release the spring the panel opens and I may not be able to stop it instantly."

"Only experiment," the King answered—"do not open yet."

"It may be hazardous, but I'll try," she acquiesced.

"Be ready!" he said to me, and I passed the word down the line.

Mademoiselle approached the wall—studied it a moment—then, with her ear against it, she began to run her fingers lightly over the central portion.

We waited—our eyes upon her—our pulses, mine at least, thumping so loud we could hear them.

Presently she faced around.

"I think I have it," she said, "but I can't be sure unless I press it."

"Don't press it," said he. "Mark the spot, so you can find it quickly." He turned to me. "I can't understand how we could hear voices through the stones—unless they are very thin at the entrance. The door isn't ajar."

Mademoiselle sank down on the upper step. The light was extinguished, and once more we waited.

Would Lotzen never leave the room, or the King's patience be exhausted! Would we never do something!

Then the something happened.

We heard a door open violently, and Madeline Spencer's voice cried:

"She has gone! De Varenne has gone!"

"Nonsense!" the Duke replied. "Where would she go—all the exits are closed?"

"I tell you she has gone—her bed has not been slept in!"

"Look in Bigler's!" he laughed.

"The covers are so arranged as to make it appear that she is there."

"Did you search elsewhere?" he asked.

"Her maid has orders not to disturb her before noon—and the Count says he saw her last about midnight."

"The Count's eyes are not always trustworthy late at night, you know. Was she with him, when he saw her last?"

"Do be sensible, Ferdinand."

"I am," he answered. "It is you who are excited. You will find the lady in the grounds, like enough—getting the air, or at some other innocent amusement. De Varenne isn't bothering her pretty head about anything but her own comfort, you may be sure."

"Come and look at her bed, if you won't be convinced," she said.

"What is the use, my dear—she isn't in it," he laughed. "However, to please you, sweethe—— What the devil is the matter, Count, that you break in on me unannounced?" he demanded.

"Madame has told you?" Bigler exclaimed.

"If you refer to De Varenne's presumed disappearance—she has told me—and I am about to go and investigate your lady's habitation. Better come with me. Mademoiselle is a very tempting morsel."

"What if she has gone to the King?"

"Let her go—she can't tell him more than he already knows."

"She can tell him of the secret passage."

"Simply that there is a secret passage into the Ferida, nothing else. She doesn't know the house, nor even the street that it is on. Come on! we'll take a look for her to satisfy Madeline—though I don't see how it concerns me even if she *is* gone. You are the interested party, my dear Bigler—and, quite between ourselves, I shouldn't much blame her for preferring a King to a Count—even if the King is the American."

"It would concern you if she should know the secret of the passage," said Madeline.

"Do you know it?" he asked.

"I do not," she answered.

And I knew from her voice that she lied.

"I detected her, yesterday, opening this very entrance," mademoiselle whispered. "She knows that I saw her—but she doesn't dare to disclose it."

Steps crossed the library—then silence followed.

The King snapped the torch, and stood up.

"You may open, mademoiselle," said he, and loosed his sword.

She smiled at him, went forward a step, pressed on the spot she had chosen—and the panel moved slowly and noiselessly outward.

"My part is done, sire," she said, drawing back. "The rest is for you. Give me the torch, so that I can light my way back to St. Germain street."

"You have done well, mademoiselle. The Queen herself will thank you, and we both shall be your debtors, so long as we live," and he took her hand and raised it, gallantly, to his lips. "You will find the carriage just beyond the corner on Forheim street. Drive to the Summer Palace and await us there."

He stepped into the library. We silently followed. The door into the corridor was shut, that into the adjoining room was open. At a motion from the King, Moore and De Coursey passed quickly to it and went in.

"Empty!" said Moore, when they returned.

Armand nodded and crossed toward the corridor. With his fingers on the knob, he paused. Some one was coming.

"Hush!" he signalled, and drew back.

The steps came nearer—stopped—the door was pushed back—and Count Bigler stood in the opening.

"Great God!" he cried. "The King!"

And, ere we could reach him, he flung the door shut behind him and sprang away, shouting as he did so:

"The King! the King! the King!"

The next instant we were in the corridor, and, Armand in front, were racing toward the wing where her Majesty was imprisoned.

As we turned the corner, the Duke of Lotzen dashed across the hallway and reached the door before us. And now his precaution against the Queen's escape worked to our profit—the door was locked and he had not the key. He turned and faced us.

"Hail! cousin," he said, his blade sweeping up in the salute. "I give you greeting but not a welcome. You come quite too unexpectedly for the latter. You seek her Majesty, I presume?"

"We do," the King answered, halting just out of distance. "Yield yourself, my lord Duke, and await her judgment."

"Not so fast, cousin, not so fast!" was the mocking reply. "You may have entered my palace, but you have not yet rescued the ladies—nor will you, except on my terms. Stay a moment, I pray you, or you sacrifice the Queen. Think you I did not provide for just such a contingency, my dear Armand, knowing the——"

"We have done with talking," the King interrupted curtly. "Yield or die."

"In either of which events, her Majesty dies be-

fore me," he smiled. "In this room," pointing over his shoulder, "is a faithful servant, who, at my command, will shoot her and Miss De Marcellin. And," with a sweeping bow, "I think I can be trusted to hold you and your hirelings in check long enough for the two revolver shots."

The King regarded him thoughtfully—and Lotzen smiled afresh, and tapped the floor with the point of his sword.

"Ordinarily, I would not credit your threat," Armand replied, "but you are so monstrous a villain—so unspeakable in your viciousness—that you are incomprehensible to human minds. You are a savage brute, cousin—and a savage brute is capable of any atrocity."

"My thanks, cousin, my best thanks!" was the answer.

"Therefore, that I may credit your tale of murder ready to be done, will you be good enough to ask the faithful servant, who is just behind the door awaiting your word, to indicate his presence there by speaking."

"No! No! cousin—the uncertainty whether I lied or not is an added impetus to your fear!" he laughed. "You must decide unaided."

But even as he said it, the Queen's voice came from within.

"He lies, Armand! There is no one here."

The King gave a glad cry.

"Are you safe, sweetheart?" he asked.

"Safe, and waiting for you."

"One moment, Dehra," said the King. Then he bent his eyes upon Lotzen. "Monsieur le Duc, I will give you one more chance for mercy—will you yield yourself prisoner?"

"And if I refuse?" said Lotzen carelessly.

"You die," was the answer.

"You will grant no terms?"

"There are no terms for such as you."

"No?" the Duke asked indifferently. "Well! so be it—you likely know your own mind, cousin. Nevertheless, I am disposed not to yield without a fight. I have long been anxious for a fitting occasion to measure swords with you again—as, you may remember, we did at the Vierle Masque. And I think the occasion is here. You used to be brave. Are you brave still, or have the joys of conjugal blessedness sapped your spirit? Will you fight me *à outrance*, or are you afraid, cousin?"

"I forbid it, Armand, I forbid it!" the Queen exclaimed.

The Duke laughed tauntingly.

"She forbids it! Pardon me, sire, I forgot that now you are ruled by a woman."

The King smiled grimly.

"Not because of your slurring words to me," he answered, "but because of your insult to her Majesty, and to relieve the House of Dalberg—

which has the misfortune to include you among its members—of any further need to blush for your misdeeds, I will waive the privilege of my rank and fight you to the death, here and now."

"No! Armand, no!" cried Dehra.

"Do not be alarmed, sweetheart," he called. "Be silent, gentlemen. It is useless to protest. We will fight."

He stripped off his Huzzar jacket, rolled up his sleeve, and waited—his face as pitiless as fate.

I understood. He had reached the limit of his patience and his mercy.

"I trust to your honor that I shall be permitted to depart without molestation, if I win," said Lotzen.

"You will not win, cousin," the King replied. "I shall kill you as I would a loathsome reptile. On guard! sir."

The Duke's sword sprang to meet him, and the fight began.

And even as the first strokes echoed through the corridor, Madeline Spencer came swiftly round the corner.

She stopped—staring! like one who could not believe her eyes—then she sank on a chair, and with chin on hand watched them, fascinated and intense.

I heard the faintest sob behind the door—followed in a moment by Dehra's voice, now brave and strong:

"I have no fear of the outcome, Armand—only be cool—and take your time."

"I shall take my time, sweetheart," the King answered, parrying a thrust that just missed his neck, while his own sword sprang vengefully forward and the Duke escaped only by a swift leap out of reach.

"A trifle close, cousin, a trifle close!" Lotzen remarked, as he rallied fiercely and came back with a marvellous display of agility and force.

"The next will be closer," Armand returned, giving not a whit. "Closer than were your automobiles and your poisoned wine in Washington, your assassin on shipboard, your train wreck at Porgia."

"We shall see, cousin, we shall see!" was the taunting reply.

"It is a fearful struggle," Moore muttered to me, as five minutes later they still fought without advantage—the King now giving ground, now Lotzen. "The Duke has improved in his play. He has tried two *coups*, with both of which, by God's grace, his Majesty was familiar—but what else has he in reserve?—— Ah! sire, I wondered why you did not use it. Now—now—let Lotzen beware!"

And the Duke saw by his opponent's eye that a new combination was about to be put in use against him, and he steadied himself, and fenced with careful caution for its coming.

And it came with the swiftness of thought—a new *coup* which the King and Moore had developed, and worked to perfection with each other.

We saw Lotzen thrust—saw the King, quick as

a flash, draw aside—saw Lotzen's sword graze his neck—saw the King straighten his own arm—and the Duke went down, pierced through the heart.

There is little more to record.

The Duke of Lotzen was buried with his fathers—he died suddenly, it was given out—and his brother Charles, a very different sort of man, succeeded to the title and estates. Madeline Spencer—after an interview with me, in the course of which she disclosed much of what otherwise I should have been unable here to record—departed the Kingdom, and whither she went or where she is I know not, neither do I care. Bigler escaped—no effort was made to apprehend him. Mlle. de Varenne was liberally rewarded—so liberally, indeed, that she was moved to protest at its surpassing generosity. I passed her on the Champs Elysées, some months ago, and she recognized me and would have stopped had I shown the least desire to renew our acquaintance.

And Hildegarde was married to Marmont, before the High Altar of the Cathedral of Dornlitz, in the presence of their Majesties and all their Court.

My tale is told. *Vale.*

FINIS.

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Hazel Owen

May 18. 1925.

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